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The Mahabharata of Vyasa

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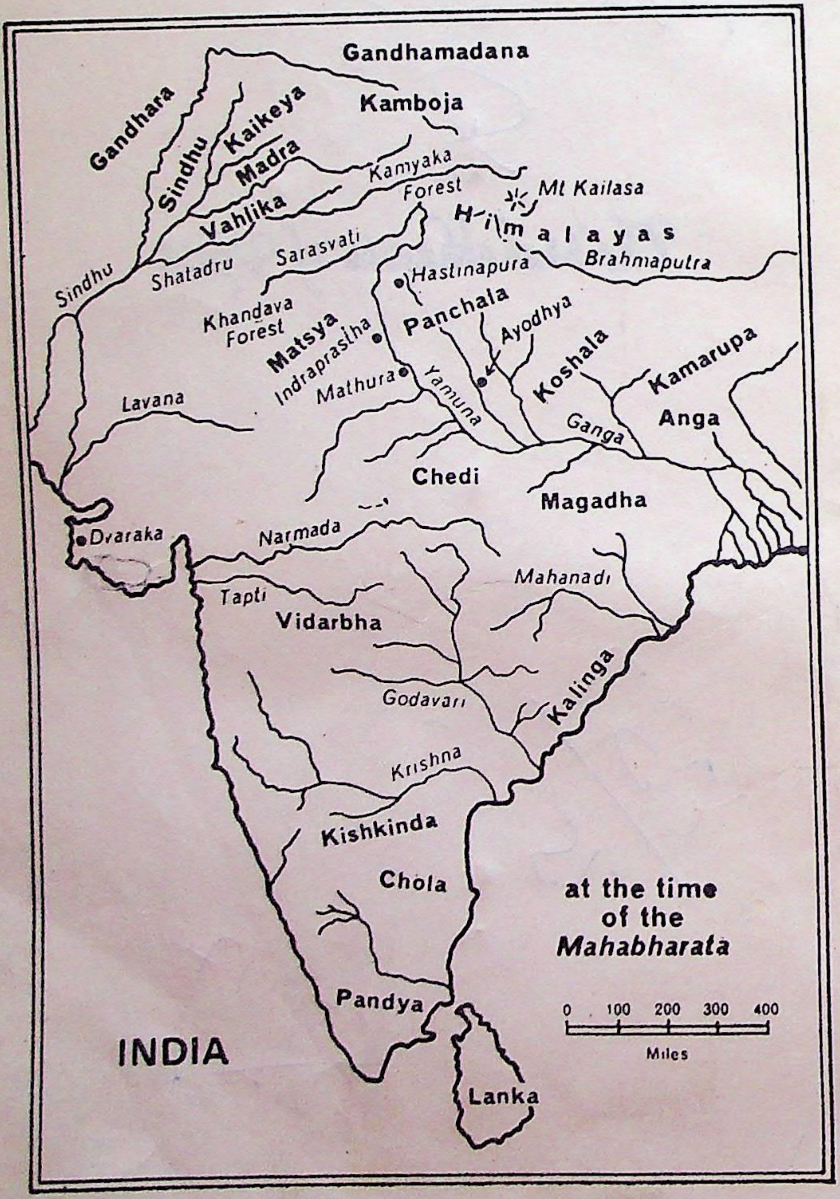
Condensed from Sanskrit and
Transcreated into English by

P Lal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at the time of the *Mahabharata*
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The Mahabharata of Vyasa

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Transcreated into English by

P Lal

REFERENCE BOOK

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VIKAS PUBLISHING HOUSE PVT LTD

To
My FATHER & MOTHER
a small tribute

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Preface

There are many condensed versions in English of the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa (the Bibliography at the end of this volume lists them all), but the only one that can be called a translation is Dr V. Raghavan's rendering which, by shortening the 100,000-śhloka epic to about 2,000 śhlokas, is microscopic in its compression. My aim has been to re-tell the story of the Kurukshetra war at greater length but always in Vyāsa's own words, without simplifying, interpreting, or elaborating. I have selected only such śhlokas as formed a continuous narrative, leaving out the large clutch of sub-stories, legends, peripheral digressions and other tangential material that is fascinating by itself but not absolutely relevant to the tale of the Kaurava-Pāṇḍava conflict.

I have stressed incidents and episodes with dramatic qualities which provided illuminating entries into the complex motivation of the *Mahābhārata*'s main characters. Wherever such a choice was available, I have preferred Vyāsan dialogue to straight narration and report.

Some readers may wonder why the transcreation in this book differs sometimes from the transcreation of the same passages in my continuing śhloka-by-śhloka version to be completed in twenty years (it was begun in 1968). This is probably due to the fact that the passages happened to be transcreated at different times, the differences (always very minor) being the result of changes in my understanding and appreciation of Vyāsa.

Diacritical marks have been omitted in the main text of the translation; they are included in the Glossary and Bibliography. The internationally accepted system of Sanskrit-English transliteration has been followed, with two exceptions: श is indicated by "śh" instead of "ś," and ष by "ṣh" instead of "ṣ."

P. LAL

Acknowledgements

This transcreation owes its genesis to James Laughlin who, after publishing my *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (New Directions, 1964), encouraged me to work on a new condensed rendering of the *Mahābhārata* in two volumes, the first dealing with the hard-core narrative (which constitutes this book), the second to be a collection of the peripheral stories, legends, myths, and fables. His suggestions on the first draft helped to improve my version into its present form.

My daughter Srimati Priyadarshini designed the arboreal motif for "*The Mahābhārata* Family Tree."

Nandini and Bimal Nopany helped with the preparation of the final typescript. Discussions with them provided some interesting insights into the interpretation of the characters of Draupadī and Yudhiṣhṭhira; these have been incorporated in my Introduction to this volume.

G. B. Nayak and his unfailingly courteous and hospitable staff at the S.E.R. Hotel in Puri created an atmosphere of idyllic tranquillity in the summer of 1979, enabling me to recuperate from the ravages of a three-month lecture tour of the States and put the finishing touches to the typescript.

"The trust we place in good people is greater than the trust we place in ourselves," says a śhloka in the Sāvitrī-Satyavān episode in Vyāsa's epic. "That is why we seek out good people." To all these good people, and to other good people who have meant well and helped without my being aware of their kindness, I express my thanks.

P. Lal

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धर्मे चार्थे च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ ।
यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न कुत्रचित् ॥

What is found in this epic
may be elsewhere;
What is not in this epic
is nowhere else.

ऊर्ध्वबाहुर्विरौम्येष न च कश्चिच्छृणोति मे ।
धर्मादर्थश्च कामश्च स किमर्थं न सेव्यते ॥

I raise my arms and I shout—
but no one listens!
From dharma comes success and pleasure;
why is dharma not practised?

—MAHABHARATA
The Eighteenth Book: Heaven: 50 & 62

Introduction

1. THE DOOMSDAY EPIC

To be Indian, or simply to live in India at any period in her recorded history, is to open oneself to the benign moral influence of two epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Caste, creed, colour do not matter here; what matters is the degree, range, and subtlety of exposure, which in turn determines the quality of the affected person's "Indianness," whatever that very large word means. It certainly means the very opposite of cultural myopia, and has no connection with any kind of hyper-sensitive parochial inwardness. "The *Mahabharata* is the content of our collective unconscious," said the late V.S. Sukthankar in a statement made in 1943 regarding the progress of his now-completed magnificent critical edition of the epic. "And just for that reason it refuses to be discarded. We must therefore grasp this great book with both hands and face it squarely. Then we shall recognise that it is our past which has prolonged itself into the present. *We are it*: I mean the real *We*."

The *Ramayana* rouses compassion, the *Mahabharata* an almost cosmic awe. The story of Rama and Sīta recommends ideal human love; the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas is a doom narrative. Valmiki rules the Hindu's heart, Vyasa goes into his very guts. Valmiki shows the *dhammapada*, the sweet and straight path of dharma, sometimes, a painful path too, but not impossible to follow; he is a gentle guru who looks back periodically to encourage his reading or listening disciple in the search for goodness. But Vyasa posits an intricate dharma, where right and wrong are bewilderingly mixed; he sits on one's back, relentlessly looking ahead to the end of a yuga, and forcing his reader to look at it too, clearly and unsentimentally. Valmiki delineates the Hindu, the Indian, dream of perfection; Vyasa pricks the Hindu, the Indian, conscience. Valmiki's epic is a vision; Vyasa's epic is a mirror in which the Indian sees himself undeceived. Not a pretty reflection—and yet look we must, adjusting a stray lock of unruly hair, squinting to wish away a wrinkle, breathing in a disobedient waistline, smiling quickly to hide inconsolable personal despair. Vyasa is ubiquitious and inescapable; he will not let us be, he is like an eczema itch, a chronic toothache, a betrayed love.

The anguished intensity of the Indian's involvement with the

Mahabharata can be seen in the way reference is made to the epic in public life. The *Ramayana* is cited generally when ethical ideals are expected; the *Mahabharata* is referred to when compromises are made, shady deals struck, promises dishonoured, battles fought, disasters lamented.

Take some recent examples. First, the *Ramayana*. Sri Jyoti Basu, leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal, chose April Fool's Day in 1970 to have a dig at the West Bengal Governor, Sri S. S. Dhavan. Sri Dhavan had issued a long statement on assuming office which concluded with the remark that his role during the President's Rule in West Bengal would be that of Bharata who had ruled Ayodhya while his elder brother Rama was in exile. Addressing a public meeting, Sri Basu said "jocularly," "I don't mind his playing the role of Bharata. But I would request him not to rule for fourteen long years, as Bharata did. Sri Dhavan should at best play the role of Bharata for a couple of months and then hand over the management of the State to Rama (the people)." This is straight wisdom.

The *Mahabharata* is invariably quoted when crooked wisdom and devious device need to be employed. In March 1970 Sri P. S. Srinivasan, a Communist Party of India member of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, criticised the Marxists for their "blind opposition" to the ruling Achutha Menon ministry, and added that, like Abhimanyu, the Marxists had entered the *padma-vyuham* (lotus army-formation) of unsuccessful agitations, but were not able to come out of it This warning was given during an Assembly session. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader of the opposition, Sri E. M. S. Namboodiripad, retorted: "Don't forget Uttara, who went to Kurukshetra and turned tail. We shall prefer to be Abhimanyu who died boldly fighting. But you are like Uttara who shamelessly fled from battle." According to the newspaper report, Sri Namboodiripad was making "an obvious reference to the C.P.I. not favouring the mid-term election."

Or consider how in 1970 the leader of the Indian National Army, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, becomes equated with Drona. "A photo of Netaji 'presided over' a public meeting addressed by an Independent candidate Pattahil Raghavan at Taliparamba in Cannanore District. Sri Raghavan adopted his novel method imitating Ekalavya, a heroic character in the *Mahabharata* who trained himself in archery in the presence of his guru Drona's statue. A largely attended meeting was surprised when Sri Raghavan placed a photo of Netaji Bose on the President's chair and himself delivered the presidential address."

In December the same year, before the elections that swept Srimati Indira Gandhi into power, a member of the Congress (O) described the Swatantra Party, B.K.D., S.S.P., and the Jana Sangh as the "four Pandava brothers" whose help, in his view, was required to fight the "Kauravas in power." Another member, Sri Malai from Orissa, pleaded with "some friends" in the party not to play the "role of Yudhishthira" (the gentle, moral eldest Pandava brother) and try to dissuade "Arjuna and Bhima" (the brothers most skilled in military arms) "from using the *dhanusha* and *gada*," the bow and mace, symbolic here of aggressive, even violent, electioneering tactics.

In a direct dig at the Congress (O) leader during the debate in Parliament on the Abolition of Privy Purse Bill in October 1970, Mrs Gandhi, referring to the incorruptible commander of Duryodhana's armies, said: "When Sri Morarji Desai rose to lead the Opposition to the Bill, I was reminded of the Kauravas making use of Bhishma. His role was to give a moral facade to an indefensible case."

And on 8 July 1979, after the resignation of Sri Devaraj Urs from the Congress (I) led by Indira Gandhi, and the consequent political split that created the conditions for a fresh struggle for leadership, the headline in a Calcutta daily provided the exact metaphor: "Urs and Mrs Gandhi Getting Ready For a 'Kurukshetra'." The news report said: "Mrs Gandhi, President of the Congress (I), and Sri Devaraj Urs, leader of the Karnataka Congress, are getting ready for what is being described as a modern 'Kurukshetra' in Karnataka, according to political observers in New Delhi."

The *Mahabharata* has many ways other than political of keeping itself alive in the Indian imagination. In Book I (Section 172 shloka 20) is a verse that celebrates lyrically the "holy Ganga" which, "flowing through heaven, is Alakananda." The Alakananda is a small river that rises in the Himalayas and flows into the Ganga. On July 22 in 1970 this "heaven-flowing" stream made front-page headlines: "THIRTEEN BUSES AND FIVE CARS SWEPT AWAY

BY ALAKANANDA—100 PILGRIMS FEARED DEAD." Next day, another two-column front-page headline: "TWO VILLAGES WASHED AWAY BY ALAKANANDA." The Special Representative of a Calcutta daily added: "From a welter of conflicting reports it is evident that a tragedy of major proportions has overtaken pilgrims to Badrinath following a sudden flood in the Alakananda."

"A tragedy of major proportions" is an accurate way of describing the *Mahabharata* itself. The epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece out there, somewhere in the past, or tucked away in air-conditioned museums and libraries. Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its legends and myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination, its events are the disturbing warp and woof of our age. It is our Doomsday Epic, a grand tale of a pyrrhic victory. It ends with the Pandavas leaving Hastinapura with the taste of ashy triumph still in their mouths. What is the point of ruling when eighteen *akshauhinis* of soldiers have been slaughtered and almost everyone you know is dead or dying? After all, Vyasa is writing about his *own* grandchildren and their internecine conflict. He fathered Dhritarashtra and Pandu, whose sons, legitimate and illegitimate, kill each other in what is one of history's most gruesome bloodbaths. Vyasa portrays this massive moral collapse in terms that appear specially relevant to a century like ours that awaits the beast of a Second Coming slouching on slow hirsute thighs, and witnesses things falling apart, the centre refusing to hold, the best lacking all conviction and the worst full of passionate intensity. The *Mahabharata* is recommended reading for an age that breeds dry thoughts in a Waste Land, speculates fascinatedly on the paradoxical Black Holes of interstellar space, and cannot be sure if there will indeed be a 2001 for mankind beyond the Holocaust. The *Mahabharata* has something significant to say about the supernatural and the occult (Yudhishthira's vision of Hell in Book 18), conscientious objection and pacifism (Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna in the *Gita* in Book 6), Women's Lib (Draupadi's challenge to the hoary male elders in Book 2), sexual frankness (Arjuna's numerous erotic relationships, Kunti's virginal conception), cataclysmic warfare (the battlefield of Kurukshetra), and a host of other contemporary concerns.

But Doomsday Epic should not be mistaken to mean Despair

Epic. The all-embracing canvas of Vyasa's *maha-kavya* provides a cathartic, liberating experience, simply because it refuses to exclude anything. To know all is to transcend all, to forgive all; perhaps; one cannot be very sure; "all" is too much and forgiveness very difficult. But even the glimpse of totality that Vyasa provides is an experience that suffices by helping to minimise the malice we feel towards our enemies, soften the contempt we have for the fanatic and the stupid, and reduce the anger or indifference we cultivate for people and things and ideas that do not fit into our pattern of life and behaviour. (I shall deal at greater length with this in the fourth section of this introduction sub-titled "The Message of the *Mahabharata*.")

To condense the vastness of Vyasa's epic, to arrive at an assimilable hard core narrative, is not an easy task because each person has his or her own, and often dogmatic, ideas of what is essential and what tangential. My criterion has been a simple one: the essential *Mahabharata* is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the twentieth century; whatever helps us understand better and live better our own Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha; whatever we would like to see passed on to our children so that they get clearer insights and perspectives into the intricate business of living and are thereby enabled, when they grow up, to select, better perhaps than we did, what they think is essential in the *Mahabharata* for the age in which their children will live and die. No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead.

2. THE HARD CORE NARRATIVE

"Those who read the *Mahabharata* merely as beautiful poetry or enjoy it with antiquarian interest as something old and naive and quaint miss its real spirit," wrote Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his foreword to Promatha Nath Mullick's *The Mahabharata as a History and a Drama* (Calcutta, 1939). The question is: What is its real spirit?

The *Mahabharata* is *maha-kavya*, the great epic, but it is also traditionally the fifth Veda, and it is of course *itihasa*, history, "his story." A good question, linked to the first, is: Whose? Two important levels of chronicling can be traced in any attempt to discover the *Mahabharata*'s hard core.

First—and much of this is severely compressed and sometimes merely suggested in my version—it is a chronicle of Hindu mythology, inextricably jumbled up and needing to be disentangled, but definitely a glorification of the eighth avatara of Vishnu—Krishna—as the appended 22,000-shloka *Harivamsha* to it testifies. Vyasa's epic, the epic of Bharat, i.e. India, is also pre-eminently Krishna's epic. Symbolically, one can see the *Mahabharata* as the peak point of evolutionary development represented by the "descents" of Vishnu in the world of mortals to give moral momentum to each age to improve itself. These descents are always placed in chronological order in literary texts and religious iconography: the water creature Fish (Matsya), the amphibian Tortoise (Kurma), the land animal Boar (Varaha), the "Missing Link" Man-Lion (Narasimha), the Hunter "Homo Erectus" Rama-with-Axe (Parashu-Rama), the feudal divinity Rama (hero of the *Ramayana*, which is also an *itihasa*, the earlier avataras being recorded in *puranas* or ancient texts), the sensitively-loving and erotic divinity Krishna (in the *Mahabharata* seen as an adviser and guide, but revealed in his full eighth avatara personality in the *Harivamsha* and the *Bhagavata Purana*), followed by the ascetically compassionate, sex-renouncing Buddha (or, alternatively, in orthodox Hinduism, Kalki, the still-to-come white apocalyptic horse). These nine moral hoops of time in ascending order of moral importance form a maha-yuga, which consists of 12,000 god-years or 4,320,000 solar or man-years.

Such is the macro time-scheme. Seen in close-focus micro-vision, the *Mahabharata* chronicles the last years of the third yuga of the Hindu mythological time-structure. The first, Krita-yuga, 1,728,000 years long, is symbolised by the colour white. It has only one caste—called *hamsa*—and one goal: truth; its people live 4,000 years; there is no sexual union—children are produced by will-power. The second, Treta-yuga, is red; it has one goal: knowledge; it lasts 1,296,000 years; the average individual life-span being 3,000 years; mere touching produces progeny. The third, Dvapara-yuga, is the yuga of the *Mahabharata*; its colour is yellow, it lasts 864,000 years; the individual life-span is 2,000 years; children are born by lawful intercourse. The present Kali-yuga is the last before the world is destroyed and gets re-created; it is calculated to have started at midnight on February 17-18, 3102 B.C., when Abhimanyu's son Parikshit ascended the throne in Hastinapura, after the Kurukshetra carnage; it will last 427,000 years; its colour is black and the average life-span varies; its people indulge in unnatural and excessive sex.

One notices how two time-spans are at variance here—the evolutionary time-scheme of the nine avataras, and the four-yuga time-scheme of Krita, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali. One could surmise that the first two yugas, with their impossible perfections, are dreams of an ideal state, a golden age nostalgically created by the mythopoeic imagination of the early Kali-yuga poets and sages, and that the Dvapara-yuga itself is a mixture of such dream and actual fact. In fact, one delightfully elastic conclusion could reasonably be arrived at—the Mahabharata War can be dated anywhere between 3,500 B.C.-1,000 B.C. The epic itself was probably continuously created over thousands of years and, in its later stages, oral and written versions very likely existed side by side.

This should prompt us to examine the *Mahabharata* at its second level—as historical chronicle. A genealogical listing is helpful in this regard, and a study of the Mahabharata Family Tree appended to this book will provide a good spring-board to appreciate the cornucopia of social, ethical, political, economic, metaphysical and other details that the epic's numerous commentators assiduously concern themselves with. What really happened? Who were the actual parties involved in the various internecine and genocidal conflicts? What conjectures are reasonable after a 5,000-year interval? Are the *Mahabharata* heroes and heroines our contemporaries only symbolically, are they only poetic projections, or can we treat them as flesh-and-blood protagonists, seen *historically*? (To suggest this is not to imply that poetry cannot also be good history or, even more important perhaps, that history cannot be good poetry.)

Introducing Romesh Chunder Dutt's English condensation of the *Mahabharata* in 1899, Max Müller wrote: "The date of its first composition is, of course, unknown. . . . All we can say is that, a collected poem, called not only Bharata, but Mahabharata, i.e. the great story of the war of the Bharatas, is mentioned clearly in the Ashvalayana Sutras, that is, before the rise of Buddhism in the sixth century B.C. But what the *Mahabharata* was then, we shall of course never know. All we can say is that, when first collected, it must have been a mnemonic poem, composed before the art of writing was known in India, or, at all events, before it had been applied to literary purposes in that country. Extraordinary as it may seem to us that so enormous a poem should have been composed and handed down by memory only, the fact itself can hardly be doubted. It is in India, of all countries of the world, where we must study the facts about the extraordinary, and to us almost incredible, powers of memory before the art of writing was known and practised. There is, no doubt, an introductory chapter of our poem which tells us how, with the help of Ganesha, the *Mahabharata* was written. But the absence of that chapter in a large number of MSS., more particularly, as Dr Winternitz has shown, in the MSS. of the South of India, speaks for itself, and proves that the idea of the poem having been composed on paper was an after-thought, and may, in fact, serve to determine the time when writing for literary purposes became the custom in India."

Max Müller then tries to reconstruct what he believes is the basic narrative of the epic, the core plot, as it were, the historical kernel. "Life seems too short to read such a gigantic poem as a whole, and various attempts have been made from time to time to reduce it to its original dimensions. The most promising was to follow the indications of an old Index or Anukramanika, incorporated in the poem itself. But if we add the number of couplets of each book, as stated in that preface, we are still left with a poem of no less than 80,000 couplets . . . . The original subject was the war between two branches of the same royal family, the Bharata princes. These Bharatas are mentioned as an ancient and most powerful race in the north of India as early as the Brahmana period, for in the Shatapatha Brahmana, XIII. 5, 4, we read, 'The greatness of the Bharatas neither the men before nor those after them have ever attained; nor did the seven tribes of men, even as mortal man does not touch the sky with his flanks.' . . . There exists always one great difficulty; we cannot tell which period of Indian history is represented to us in each of its various component parts. Every race in the North, the South, the East, and West of India wished to see some account of its own heroes inserted in the national epic. Philosophers claimed some mention of their doctrines as a proof of their antiquity, and as a kind of brief of nobility. Moral and legal authorities clamoured naturally for the same mention; and even mere customs, rules about caste, marriage, and inheritance had to be placed under the shield of the ancient epic. The geography, the ethnology, the migrations of races in India, all may be studied in the *Mahabharata*. The dominating religious cult, not at the time of the Great War itself, but at the time of the final redaction of the poem, was clearly the worship of Krishna, and this is generally referred to a time after the disappearance of Buddhism from the soil of India, so that the final redaction of the epic can hardly be placed. . .before the fourth century A.D. But much of this is still uncertain, and we must carefully guard against premature and positive assertions when we treat of the chronology of Indian literature, and its epic literature in particular. Every generation of scholars builds up its own system of chronology, and the next generation pulls it down."

"Much of this is still uncertain. . ..''That brings us back to square one. In spite of the prevailing nebulosity, attempts continue to be made to discover a "hard core." For instance, Romesh Chunder Dutt's condensation—"a snap-shot, as it were, of the old poem," commented Max Müller, somewhat inaccurately, because it was really a series of stringently selected frames—was fleshed around the following skeleton: Astra Darsana (The Tournament), Swayamvara (The Bride's Choice), Rajasuya (The Imperial Sacrifice), Dyuta (The Fatal Dice), Pativrata-Mahatmya (Woman's Love—this retells the Savitri-Satyavan story, and is not strictly a part of the hard core *Mahabharata*), Go-harana (Cattle-Lifting), Udyoga (The Preparation), Bhishma-Badha (Fall of Bhishma), Drona-Badha (Fall of Drona), Karna-Badha (Fall of Karna), Sraddha (Funeral Rites), and Aswa-Medha (Sacrifice of the Horse), concluding with a section in which Indra welcomes Yudhishthira into heaven. Obviously, Dutt treated the epic as a straight narrative of the Kuru dynasty's rise and fall. That is one way of finding out what happened, because Vyasa is telling his own and his family's story, along with the story of their descendants, so that for the majority of Indian readers the reading of the epic is a return to, and a discovery of roots.

For many twentieth-century scholars, however, there is much more in the tale than a simple search for ethnic and other roots. They see the *Mahabharata* as a record, on one level, of imperial expansion and, on another, as a text of elitist cultural self-justification and self-glorification. They interpret the epic accordingly.

First, imperial expansion. In the last sentence of his introduction (written in the cozy haunt of Oxford) to Dutt's translation, Max Müller recommends the work because it will enable "students of literature to form for themselves some kind of idea of what our Aryan brothers in India admired and still admire in the epic poetry of their country." Aryan brotherhood, according to Iravati Karve, was apparently an exclusive affair. In her brilliantly original commentary on the *Mahabharata* titled *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Deshmukh Prakashan, 1969), she argues that the burning of the forest in Book 1 "gives us a glimpse of the larger struggle in which the newly arrived Aryans and the Nagas, the older inhabitants of the land, were locked for generations." Krishna and Arjuna encircled the Khandava forest "butchering the escaping creatures. The forest continued to burn for a week . . . from this holocaust only seven creatures (were they humans?) escaped." What was the necessity of this ruthless, fierce extermination of an entire forest populace? "The Pandavas' Kingdom was a capital surrounded by villages and fields. Perhaps Krishna and Arjuna burned the forest to provide more land for cultivation. This was the duty of a ruling king. In this way he could expand his realm without encroaching upon other Kshatriyas—something forbidden by the Kshatriya code." (It is possible to read the *Ramayana* as an account of colonial penetration by the Aryans of Ayodhya led by Rama who, with the help of a faithful mercenary army of forest-folk or "treemen" called *vanaras*, routed the *asura* anti-god of Lanka, Ravana.) The Nagas who were slaughtered in the man-made forest conflagration were the original dwellers of India who lived "along the rivers in the forests," while the Aryans "preferred more open country. . . . The land was usurped after a massacre, a massacre which is praised as a valorous deed. This was because the victims were not Kshatriyas or their Aryan subjects. Here Krishna and Arjuna played the familiar role of the conquering settler." But Vyasa does have a shrewd sense of poetic justice, as he has of nemesis—it is the Naga King Takshaka's son (who is one of the six, not seven, who escaped the fiery genocide) who kills "Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson, who ruled Hastinapura after the Pandavas."

Elitist cultural self-justification is best seen in the way the Bhargava clan of Brahmins appropriated the *Mahabharata* from the non-Brahmin *Suta* wandering story-tellers, and proceeded through accretion and interpolation to transform the epic into an often embarrassing glorification of everything Brahminical. "The Bhargavas are represented in our epic—the *Mahabharata*, the epic of the Bharatas or the epic of the Bharata War—throughout as *the* people," says the late V.S. Sukthankar in his remarkable essay "The Bhrgus and the Bharata: A Text-Historical Study." "There can be no question that all this Bhargava material (and it is copious, spread all over the eighteen books) in our present *Mahabharata* is entirely foreign to the plan of the original saga. . . ." The original epic of about 24,000 shlokas fell "in the hands of the Bhargavas who developed it and so to say re-created it, as their exclusive literary property, and they exploited it thereafter and propagated it in their own way. The colossal success of the Bhargava recension of the ancient Epic of the Bharatas, a success which in one sense was richly deserved, was the indirect cause of the neglect and subsequent disappearance of the original heroic poem, which probably still existed at the time of the composition of the Ashvalayana Sutra (3.4.4). . . . When the epic at last passed out of the hands of the Bhargavas and became the common property of the literati of India, it still remained a fluid text, not entirely closed to minor alteration and expansion, but retained its character as a traditional work, revered and cherished by the people as the work of Maharshi Vyasa and serving still as a vehicle of popular education, inspiration and edification as intended by the Bhargavas."

I have omitted most of the Bhargava "additions" from my condensed transcreation. Because he "in *reality* has no connection whatever with the action" of the *Mahabharata*, I have even excised the stupendous feat of the great Bhargava, Parashurama, the axe-wielding avatara of Vishnu who, in a classic case of over-kill, exterminated the Kshatriya race and created five lakes of blood as proof of Brahmin superiority and supremacy, but I confess that it has not been possible to leave out the greatest "Bhargava" of them all, Krishna himself, Balarama's younger brother. The family tree appended to this volume, for reasons of space, does not clearly show the Bhargavan lineage of Krishna—Bhrigu marries Puloma, whose son Kavi has a son called Shukra, whose daughter Devayani marries Yayati; Devayani and Yayati's son is Yadu, and Krishna is a Yadava. To expel Krishna from the epic would be to have *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark.

Mythology and history studies help, but the safest way to deal with the epic is still to look at its "plot." A résumé of the eighteen books might provide the bewildered reader with the best entry into the *Mahabharata* cosmos of box-within-box labyrinth-cum-mystic mandala-cum-myth maze extravaganza of interlocking stories carefully strung into an unmistakable overriding narrative. The very compressed summary that follows has been taken from the essay on the *Mahabharata* in *Religious Hinduism* (St. Paul Publications, Allahabad, 1964), and further shortened in reproduction:

Book 1 (Southern Recension: 9884 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 7984 shlokas). The first quarter of Book 1 is given to introduction. The story begins with the account of the genealogy of the Bharats. The ancestor of the royal house of Kuru is Shantanu. Shantanu married the goddess Ganga: their son is Bhishma. Shantanu takes as second wife the daughter of a fisherman, Satyavati, who gives him two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Both die without children and, Bhishma refusing to break his vow of chastity, Vyasa, the illegitimate son of Satyavati, is called upon to beget descendants. Vyasa is very ugly and, at his approach, the first widow of Vichitravirya closes her eyes and gives birth to a blind son, Dhritarashtra. The second widow grows pale and gives birth to a pale child, Pandu. A third child, Vidura, is born to Vyasa from a royal maid.

Bhishma, virtuous ruler, arranges for the marriage of his three nephews. Dhritarashtra, the blind prince, marries Gandhari and begets one hundred sons. The eldest is Duryodhana. Pandu has two wives: Kunti who had already one son, Karna, and who gives Pandu three more sons: Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna; and Madri who gives birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. (In a later addition, the five sons of Pandu are said to have been begotten by five gods; Yudhishthira is given as the son of Dharma, the god of justice, Bhima as the son of Vayu, Arjuna as the son of Indra, and the twins as the sons of the Ashvins). Pandu, who had been made king because of his brother's blindness, dies, and the blind Dhritarashtra assumes royal power. Pandu's five sons are educated with the blind king's hundred sons at the court of Hastinapura. Soon animosity and rivalry arise between the cousins. Under the guidance of two learned Brahmins, Kripa and Drona, they vie with one another in the art of war. Two more pupils are added to the group: Ashvatthaman, son of Drona, and Karna, the "low-born" son of Kunti. Karna is despised by his royal half-brothers and espouses the cause of Dhritarashtra's sons, who are the Kauravas, while Pandu's sons are known as the Pandavas.

When Yudhishthira comes of age, old king Dhritarashtra appoints him heir-apparent and the Pandavas gain in prestige and power. A plot against them is organised by Duryodhana, his younger brother Duhshasana, their maternal uncle Shakuni, a cunning and malevolent old rascal, and Karna. They build a house of lac and invite the Pandavas to reside in it, with their mother. Warned in time by Vidura, the Pandavas enter the house, set it on fire, and escape to the forest through an underground passage. The Kauravas, thinking their cousins dead, perform the funeral rites, while the Pandavas are threatened in the forest by the giant Hidimba. Bhima disposes of the demon, marries his sister, who gives birth to a son Ghatotkacha.

The king of Panchala, Drupada, whose kingdom had been partly conquered by Arjuna under the instigation of Drona, is preparing the *svayamvara* of his daughter Draupadi. A *svayamvara* is a traditional type of marriage in which the girl is allowed to chose her husband among the numerous candidates who have been invited. Disguised as Brahmins, the Pandavas go to Drupada's capital where the Kauravas and a host of other princes are already assembled. The son of Drupada, Dhrishtadyumna proclaims that the prince who will be able to bend the big bow of Drupada and hit the mark will obtain Draupadi as his wife. Prince after prince tries and fails. At last Karna, out-of-wedlock first son of Kunti, is on the point of succeeding when Draupadi exclaims that she will not accept a charioteer as her husband (after his abandonment by Kunti, Karna was adopted by a charioteer Adhiratha and his wife Radha). Then, from the ranks of the Brahmins, under a perfect disguise, Arjuna rises, bends the bow and hits the target. Draupadi gives him the garland which indicates her choice. The princes are furious and try to kill Drupada, but Bhima and Arjuna defeat them and the five Pandavas go to their mother Kunti and decide that Draupadi will be their common wife. They are congratulated by Krishna and Balarama. The identity of the Pandavas is revealed. Old Dhritarashtra gives them half the kingdom and they settle at Indraprastha (identified with modern Delhi).

In order to avoid jealousy and strife, it is agreed among the five brothers that no one will disturb the private meeting of any of them with Draupadi. One day, Arjuna, in quest of weapons, enters the room where Yudhishthira and Draupadi are alone. As a punishment he goes in to exile and has many adventures, both amorous and heroic. He visits Krishna at Dvaraka, falls in love with Krishna's sister Subhadra, and carries her away. Subhadra gives him a son, Abhimanyu. The friendship between Arjuna and Krishna grows stronger every day.

Book 2 (Southern Recension: 4511 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 2511 shlokas). The Pandavas embark on a series of conquests which confer upon Yudhishthira the right to assume the title of "the Ruler of the World." A great sacrifice called Rajasuya is to be celebrated and all the neighbouring princes are invited. Duryodhana and his brothers are full of envy and hatred, and it is their cunning uncle Shakuni who suggests to them the means of humiliating the Pandavas. They will invite Yudhishthira to a game of dice and Shakuni, the expert cheat, will defeat him. Old king Dhritarashtra, after some hesitation, gives his consent and Vidura is sent to convey the invitation to Yudhishthira. A big gathering assembles in the hall of the Kauravas and the game begins. Yudhishthira loses his treasures, his wealth, his jewels, his chariot, his slaves, his elephants and horses. Then he stakes his land and his kingdom. Unable to control his passion, he stakes his own brothers and himself. Finally, taunted by Shakuni, he stakes Draupadi. The Kauravas triumph. Draupadi refuses to appear in the gambling hall, and Duhshasana goes and drags her in by the hair. Before the coarse and brutal treatment of Draupadi, Bhima, unable to control himself, takes the terrible oath of tearing open Duhshasana's breast and drinking his blood in the great war. Duryodhana insults Draupadi vilely, and Bhima swears that he will avenge her. Now old king Dhritarashtra is frightened and, on Draupadi's request, gives back to the Pandavas their freedom and their kingdom. But Duryodhana is insatiable in his hatred and obtains from his weak and doting father the permission to invite the Pandavas to another game of dice. This time, the loser will have to go into exile for twelve years, live one more year incognito and return only in the fourteenth year.

Book 3 (Southern Recension: 11,664 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 11,664 shlokas). In the midst of public desolation, the Pandavas leave for the forest. In vain Vidura beseeches Dhritarashtra to recall them. Krishna visits them and incites them to fight. Draupadi and Bhima support him, but Yudhishthira decides to keep his word. In quest of heavenly weapons, Arjuna spends five years in Indra's heaven, while his brothers and Draupadi live the hard existence of forest-dwellers. To console Yudhishthira the sage Brihadashva tells him the story of Nala and Damayanti, a beautiful tale of love and misery. They visit holy places and listen to the stories of holy men and warriors. They are threatened by "demons," but Bhima rescues them. Arjuna returns from Indra's heaven with secret weapons. They live happily for four years in the garden of Kubera. Back in the forest, they listen to many tales and instructions which holy men are eager to tell them. Duryodhana decides to visit his exiled cousins in order to humiliate them, but he is made prisoner by the Gandharvas and, to his utter discomfiture, is rescued by the Pandavas. Karna undertakes extensive conquests and Duryodhana assumes the title of universal monarch. Jayadratha, king of the Sindhus, abducts Draupadi whom the Pandavas rescue. Depressed by the misery of their exile, they draw consolation from the story of Rama and Sita. They also listen to the poignant story of Savitri who, by her faithful love, was able to call back her husband from the realm of Yama, the god of death. Yudhishthira is afraid of Karna who has been given the gift of invulnerability. Indra, disguised as a Brahmin, obtains from Karna the armour and ear-rings which made him invulnerable and gives him a deadly spear which can be used once only in case of extreme emergency. The four younger Pandavas die by drinking enchanted water, and Yudhishthira restores them to life by answering the questions of the Yaksha who owns the lake.

Book 4 (Southern Recension: 3,500 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 2,050 shlokas). Twelve years have elapsed and the Pandavas have to remain another twelve months without being recognised. They hide their weapons near a cemetery and enter the services of king Virata. Yudhishthira becomes counseller, Bhima is engaged as a cook, Arjuna as a dancing-master, Nakula as horse-tamer, Sahadeva as a cowherd, and Draupadi as a chamber-maid. Bhima distinguishes himself also as a wrestler. When the king's brother-in-law tries to molest Draupadi, Bhima strangles him. The five brothers, still unrecognised, help king Virata defeat the Trigartas and the Kauravas. Then, at the close of the thirteenth year, they reveal their identities, and king Virata gives his daughter Uttara in marriage to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.

Book 5 (Southern Recension: 7,998 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 6,698 shlokas). While attempts at bringing about a peaceful settlement are being made, each side is trying to enlist allies. Krishna is approached by both camps and offers an army to Duryodhana while promising his personal advice and support to Arjuna. King Shalya will fight on the side of the Kauravas as Karna's charioteer, but he agrees with Yudhishthira to manoeuvre the chariot in such a way as to put Karna in an unfavourable position. In spite of the entreaties of his old parents, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, Duryodhana refuses peace. Krishna tries to persuade Karna to take the side of the Pandavas, and Kunti tries to influence Karna by appealing to him as his mother, but Karna decides to remain faithful to his friend Duryodhana, although the secret is revealed to him of his real birth from the god Surya. Both armies march towards Kurukshetra. The Commander of the Pandavas is Dhrishtadyumna, son of Drupada and brother of Draupadi. The Commander of the Kauravas is Bhishma.

Book 6 (Southern Recension: 5,884 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 5,884 shlokas). Samjaya, the charioteer of the blind old king, is given the power to see all that happens on the battlefield and he relates everything to Dhritarashtra. At this place the 18 chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita* are inserted: Krishna, charioteer of Arjuna, teaches him that he must not hesitate to fight, although his enemies are his own relatives. The long and beautiful discourse is a separate work which breaks the narrative of the battle. During ten days, the heroes of both armies fight determinedly. At night the Pandavas go to consult Bhishma, the Commander of their enemies, and learn from him that he will refrain from fighting only when faced by Shikhandin. Shikhandin was a child of Drupada born as a girl. Later he lived as a man, but Bhishma ignored the sex-change and, considering him as a woman, refused to fight against him. Accordingly, the Pandavas send him to the battlefield and Arjuna, hidden behind him, pierces Bhishma with his arrows. Both armies gather around the fallen hero and leave him lying on a bed of arrows.

Book 7 (Southern Recension: 8,909 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 8,909 shlokas). Drona succeeds Bhishma as Commander of the Kauravas. Jayadratha, brother-in-law of Duryodhana, isolates Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna, and kills him. Arjuna avenges his son's death by killing Jayadratha. Karna, in the heat of the battle, uses the deadly spear given him by Indra to kill Ghatotkacha, thus losing the power to kill one of the Pandavas. Drona kills Drupada and Virata. Then Krishna conceives a trick to dispose of Drona: an elephant called Ashvatthaman, like Drona's son, has been killed by Bhima, who shouts with exultation that Ashvatthaman is dead. Yudhishthira, famous for his love of truth, is persuaded by Krishna to repeat the lie, and Drona, overwhelmed with sorrow, lays down his arms and falls into deep meditation. Dhrishtadyumna cuts off the head of the old preceptor and throws it into the camp of the Kauravas. The fifteenth day of the battle ends.

Book 8 (Southern Recension: 4,900 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 4,900 shlokas). Karna is appointed Commander after Drona's death. Reluctantly king Shalya agrees to become Karna's charioteer. The time of Bhima's revenge has come: he hurls Duhshasana from his chariot, tears open his breast and drinks his blood, thus avenging the honour of Draupadi. Yudhishthira is wounded. After visiting him, Arjuna returns to battle, and a terrible duel takes place between him and Karna. Indra supports Arjuna, and Surya helps Karna. The wheel of Karna's chariot sinks into the mud and Arjuna, refusing to allow his opponent to resume a better position, kills him.

Book 9 (Southern Recension: 3,220 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 3,220 shlokas). Shalya succeeds Karna as general. In a single-handed fight, he is killed by Yudhisthira, while Sahadeva kills the old and mischievous Shakuni. The Kauravas are all but defeated. Duryodhana is alone, except for three warriors, Ashvatthaman, Kripa, and Kritavarman. He takes refuge in a lake where, through magical power, he hides under the waters. The Pandavas find him and challenge him. Bhima will fight him with his club. The two heroes duel while the others look on. On the instigation of Krishna, Bhima strikes an unfair blow on Duryodhana's thigh and kicks him with his left foot. Duryodhana bitterly reproaches Krishna for his treachery. Krishna is sent to console Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. Duryodhana appoints Ashvatthaman Commander-in-chief. The Pandavas retire to the bank of the Oghavati.

Book 10 (Southern Recension: 870 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 870 shlokas). The three surviving Kauravas attack the sleeping Pandavas at night. Only Krishna, the five brothers and Satyaki are absent from the camp. Ashvatthaman strangles Dhrishtadyumna, the slayer of his father; then, going from bed to bed, he mercilessly kills all the warriors, including the five sons of Draupadi, and Shikhandin. Demons come prowling to feast on the flesh of the slain. Duryodhana is still alive to hear that he has been avenged. Draupadi, maddened by sorrow, exacts the punishment of Ashvatthaman. Probably the early account of Ashvatthaman's punishment has been lost; what we read in the *Mahabharata* is a recast of the original. Ashvatthaman being a Brahmin is not killed but cursed by Krishna to wander for three thousand years, shunned and rejected by all.

Book 11 (Southern Recension: 775 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 775 shlokas). The five brothers meet Dhitarashtra and Gandhari, and the bereaved old couple receive them without bitterness Then the ladies of the Kauravas visit the battlefield and the old queen Gandhari, mother of the hundred sons who have been slain, describes her horrible vision. Her sons are lying dead, in the midst of jackals and demons. Her daughter-in-law, dishevelled and frantic, are crying and lamenting near the corpses of their husbands. Then, turning towards Krishna, she blames him for not having prevented the slaughter and curses him. The funeral rites are performed and all the survivors retire to the bank of the Ganga. (About this Book the Parva-Samgraha, the "Contents," of the epic says: "To read it is to be moved, if the heart has feeling; to read it is to weep, if the eye has tears." This Book was probably the end of the great epic. The seven remaining Books were in all likelihood added in the course of time)

Book 12 (Southern Recension: 14,525 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 14,525 shlokas). The true story of Karna's birth having been revealed, Yudhishthira decides to expiate his fratricide by retiring to the forest. He is dissuaded from doing so and is installed on the throne. Then Krishna set out with the five brothers to the battlefield where they find Bhishma, lying on his bed of arrows, and ready to instruct them. There follows an immense discourse of the dying hero. In brief, the discourse falls into three parts:

(1) *The duties of a king*: the four castes; the four stages of life; the duties of the Kshatriyas; administration; war; general precepts.

(2) *Conduct in times of calamity*: Brahmins must be protected at all cost; alliance with those who have similar interests; greed and ignorance to be avoided; the greatest virtue is self-control; discussion on the four aims of life: Vidura favours *dharma* (duty), Arjuna *artha* (wealth), Bhima *kama* (passion), Yudhishthira *moksha* (liberation).

(3) *Liberation*: its fundamental condition is *tyaga* or renunciation which consists in killing all desires; the origin of the world; life and death; good and evil; rules for daily life; the practice of *yoga* and of *japa* (ejaculatory prayer); greatness of Vishnu; concentration on the all-pervading Atman; ahimsa or non-injury to all creatures; house-holder and sannyasin; philosophical doctrine of Samkhya and Yoga, the *Narayaniya*: extolling Narayana as the Supreme Being.

Book 13 (Southern Recension: 12,000 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 6,700 shlokas). Bhishma goes on with his discourse. Various topics are touched upon: the law of Karma, the respect due to Brahmins; marriage and inheritance; the sanctity of the cow; funeral rites, fasts and offerings; praise of Krishna After his long discourse, Bhishma announces the time of his death. In the presence of a great concourse of people, his spirit ascends to the skies. The funeral rites are performed.

Note: Books 12 and 13 are obviously brahminical additions. Their connection with the epic is purely accidental. Their 22,000 shlokas embody the teachings of several generations of brahminical lore. Although the general doctrine tends to extol Vishnu (Vasudeva, Krishna) as the Supreme Lord, there are important portions which expound Shaivite tenets and celebrate the Supreme Lordship of Shiva (Mahadeva).

Book 14 (Southern Recension: 4,420 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 3,320 shlokas). Yudhishthira is advised to perform the horse-sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). At the request of Arjuna, Krishna summarises the teaching given in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This summary is called the *Anugita* and is divided into three parts: instruction given by a Siddha to a Brahmin; instruction of a Brahmin to his wife; instruction of a guru to his pupil. The widow of Abhimanyu, Uttara, gives birth to a still-born child whom Krishna restores to life and who is given the name of Parikshit. Preparations for the horse-sacrifice are begun. The horse is let loose and Arjuna is appointed to follow it and to conquer all the kingdoms to which the horse leads him. After one year, Arjuna returns with the horse and the sacrifice is performed in the presence of all the kings subdued by Arjuna. The Pandavas are cleansed of all their sins. (The last chapters of this Book contain a discussion on the value of the sacrifice: it is not the offering that matters but the internal dispositions of the worshipper.)

Book 15 (Southern Recension: 1,906 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 1,506 shlokas). For fifteen years, old king Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari live with their nephews. Then the old couple, accompanied by Kunti, Vidura and Samjaya, retire to the forest. The Pandavas visit them. Vidura dies and his spirit enters Yudhishthira. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti obtain from Vyasa the boon of seeing their dead relatives in the other world. After two years the news is brought to Yudhisthira that Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti have died in a forest fire.

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Book 16 (Southern Recension: 300 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 300 shlokas). The curse of Gandhari finds its fulfilment: in a club-fight Krishna's brother Balarama is killed. Dejected, Krishna lies down in a forest and is killed by a hunter.

Book 17 (Southern Recension: 120 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 120 shlokas). The five brothers, leaving the affairs of the kingdom to Arjuna's grandson Parikshit, the sole surviving heir of the Pandavas, take the garb of ascetics, move about the country and retire to Mount Meru, accompanied by Draupadi. They all die except Yudhishthira who refuses to enter heaven if his brothers and his dog are not there with him. His dog reveals itself to have been the god Dharma in disguise. Indra promises Yudhishthira that he will see his brothers and Draupadi in heaven.

Book 18 (Southern Recension: 200 shlokas; Poona Critical Edition: 200 shlokas). Yudhishthira, on reaching heaven, sees Duryodhana seated on a throne, but does not see his brothers and Draupadi. He asks to be led where they are. He is taken by the sinners' road to hell where the Pandavas are in torments, and decides to remain with them. Indra appears, reveals to him that all this was an illusion meant to test his steadfastness and takes him to heaven where he meets his brothers and Draupadi. It is revealed that Draupadi is an incarnation of the goddess Shṛi (Lakshmi, Prosperity) and that the other heroes of the story are incarnations of various deities.

(A summary of the *Mahabharata*, in considerably greater detail, can be found on pages 5-42 of the Twayne's World Authors Series edition of *The Mahabharata* by Barend A. Van Nooten, published in 1971.)

3. COMPLEXITY OF CHARACTERISATION

"What heroes!" marvelled Romesh Chunder Dutt in 1899. "In the delineation of character the *Mahabharata* is far above anything we find in later Sanskrit poetry. Indeed, with much that is fresh and sweet and lovely in later Sanskrit poetry, there is little or no portraiture of character. All heroes are cast much in the same heroic mould; all love-sick heroines suffer in silence and burn with fever, all fools are shrewd and impudent by turns, all knaves are heartless and cruel and suffer in the end. There is not much to distinguish between one warrior and another, between one tender woman and her sister."

Vyasa, on the other hand, is nothing if not subtle and often ambiguous. "In the *Mahabharata* we find just the reverse; each has a distinct individuality, a character of his own, clearly discernible from that of other heroes. No work of the imagination that could be named, always excepting the *Iliad*, is so rich and so true as the *Mahabharata* in the portraiture of the human character,—not in torment and suffering as in Dante, not under overwhelming passion as in Shakespeare,—but human character in its calm dignity of strength and repose. . . . The old Kuru monarch Dhritarashtra, sightless and feeble, but majestic in his ancient grandeur; the noble grandsire Bhishma, 'death's subduer' and unconquerable in war; the doughty Drona, venerable priest and vengeful warrior; and the proud and peerless archer Karna— each had a distinct character of his own which cannot be mistaken for a moment. The good and royal Yudhishthir (I omit the final *a* in some names which occur frequently), the 'tiger-waisted' Bhima and the helmet-wearing' Arjun are the Agamemnon, the Ajax, and the Achilles of the Indian Epic. The proud and unyielding Duryodhan, and the fierce and fiery Duhshasan stand out foremost among the wrathful sons of the feeble old monarch. And Krishna possesses a character higher than that of Ulysses; unmatched in human wisdom, ever striving for righteousness and peace, he is thorough and unrelenting in war when war has begun. And the women of the Indian Epic possess characters as marked as those of the men. The stately and majestic queen Gandhari, the loving and doting mother Kunti, the proud and scornful Draupadi nursing her wrath till her wrongs are fearfully avenged—these are distinct images pencilled by the hand of a true master in the realm of creative imagination."

Dutt stressed the individuality and variety of Vyasa's men and women, but it is equally, if not more, important to note their finely nuanced complexity. Irony and wit are conspicuously minimal in the *Mahabharata*, the Indian literary mind preferring symbolism, solemnity, and the subtlety of straight simplicity. But psychological depth and intensity are very much present, and stereotyped epithets such as "stately and majestic," "loving and doting," and "proud and scornful" do scant justice to the splendid ladies of the *Mahabharata*, just as the other familiar, conventional adjectives fail to indicate the eccentricities, ambiguities and occasional inexplicable departures from dharma of the *Mahabharata*'s masculine contingent. No easy and convenient entries are possible into the epic's gallery of heroes and heroines.

It is precisely this perplexing complexity that I wish to point out here, in the hope that my tentative interpretations will stimulate the reader to embark on further exploration on his own. Since Dutt in the nineteenth century ended with the ladies, it might be appropriate in the twentieth to begin with them. What heroines! I shall quickly look at some facets of the characters of two: Draupadi and Kunti.

DRAUPADI. Take the disrobing scene in Book 2. Romesh Dutt has the following hexametric *Locksley Hall* couplets describing the misbehaviour of Duryodhana in the hall:

> Madness seized the proud Duryodhan, and inflamed by passion
> base,
> Sought the prince to stain Draupadi with a deep and dire
> disgrace!
> On the proud and peerless woman cast his loving, lustful
> eye,
> Sought to hold the high-born princess as his slave upon his
> knee!

(For the Everyman's Library edition eleven years later, in 1910, Dutt changed "loving, lustful eye" to "wicked, lustful eye," and substituted the palpitating exclamation mark at the end of the second line with a sedate comma.) The right rhyme for "eye" is "thigh," which is also the correct Englishing of the original word in Sanskrit, *uru*. But Dutt's Anglicised-Hindu Victorian propriety, shuddering at the implications of a lady ensconced on a gentleman's thigh, preferred the innocuous "knee"—the only instance of a non-rhyme in the book!—and left it to his reader's good sense to guess that he meant "thigh." (At the end of his Section titled

"Fall of Karna," he repeated his deliberate rhyming "error," really a ruse: "Till his vow remembered Bhima, and he raised his weapon high,/With a foul attack but fatal Bhima broke Duryodhan's knee!")

Dutt is only one small example of the many weak-kneed approaches to the epic's "strong" scenes and, in particular, to the character of Draupadi and her humiliation in the assemby hall. Some translators just will not acknowledge that Draupadi is in her period when she is dragged into the hall. Others do, but in discreet and circuitous ways. The late V. Raghavan, in his condensed version of the *Mahabharata*, published by Natesan's of Madras in 1953, translated Draupadi's unequivocal "rajasvalasmi" ("I am in my period") ambiguously as "I am unwell," as if the good lady was down with a mild attack of flu.

And Professor J.A.B. Van Buitenen, in his version brought out by the University of Chiçago Press in 1975, has this:

> And as she was dragged, she bent her body
> And whispered softly, "It is now my month!
> This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,
> You cannot take me to the hall, you churl!"

The point surely is that Draupadi is "unwell" in a special way, and her "month" needs a more exact rendering. Vyasa tells it straight; why should we equivocate? To blur the original is to miss the cathartic import of some of the *Mahabharata*'s most horrific scenes.

When Draupadi is dragged into the *sabha*, she is aghast because an attempt is made by Duhshasana to strip her of her "single dress" which, the text says, is stained with menstrual blood. There is need here to mention the ancient Hindu belief that a woman in her period was held as *ashaucha* or "impure" for the first three days, and was obliged to stay apart, or even in a different house, almost in a kind of solitary confinement. To appear before men, specially strangers, in that condition was inconceivable. The text makes it clear that Draupadi was isolated even from the palace ladies; she tried to run to their quarters for help, but was intercepted by Duhshasana.

Bhima's savage vows, seen in this context, seem less preposterous and horrendous than they would otherwise. His promise is to smash

Duryodhana's thigh when the great battle comes—because Duryodhana lewdly pointed to his thigh (not his knee!) and invited Draupadi to sit on it. (No wonder, for a lady of Draupadi's excellent proportions would have caused a knee-fracture, no less.) Bhima also vows to rip open Duhshasana's belly and drink his blood on the battlefield because Duhshasana was guilty of pulling the blood-stained single garment of Draupadi. Readers familiar with the unsentimental world of high epic, whether Greek or Hindu, will also see why Draupadi's startling action of washing (or, as some translate, dipping) her hair in Duhshasana's blood is not altogether barbaric; interpreted in context, it is, however fearful, only a symbolic gesture of appropriate redemptive revenge; it was, after all, Duhshasana who dragged her by her hair in the *sabha.* Call it karma, or poetic justice, what you will—it makes good epic sense.

Besides, the action is not out of consonance with Draupadi's character. She is no silent, suffering and compliant Sita, no docile Damayanti, no self-sacrificing Savitri. She is not awed by the authority of self-appointed gentlemen. Iravati Karve says in *Yuganta* that Draupadi's great mistake was to assume the role of a "lady pundit" in the assembly hall and "pretend that she would understand questions that baffled her (male) elders—that was inexcusable arrogance." In Book 3, "The Forest," Yudhishthira describes her as a "lady pundit," which is "hardly a complimentary epithet in the eyes of the Kshatriyas of the *Mahabharata.* . . . For a young bride to show off her intelligence in the presence of her elders was a grave mistake."

The "intelligence" of Draupadi is contained in a simple but unanswerable question: "Is Yudhishthira morally and legally right in staking me after he has staked and lost himself in the dice-game?" This looks harmless enough, but even wise Bhishma confesses that he is baffled. He sidesteps the question by saying, "Dharma is subtle." Not really; at least it need not be all that subtle. The heart of the matter is that Draupadi had dared to ask a question that cuts at the very roots of the Hindu social tradition, specially in relation to its attitude to the position and rights of women. And Bhishma would rather preserve that tradition and defend the status quo than give an opinion which could be construed by clever critics as an adverse judgment on it.

Consider the implications. According to Iravati Karve, "what

Draupadi was contending was that once Yudhishthira had become a slave he had lost his freedom and had no right to claim anything as his own; a slave has nothing he can stake. Then how could Yudhishthira stake her freedom? Although her argument seems plausible from one point of view, even a slave has a wife, and the fact of his slavery does not destroy his authority over her. Moreover, from the most ancient times a slave had the right to accumulate certain property that was entirely his own. The question was thus a tangled one, involving the rights of a master over a slave and a slave over his wife."

No wonder Bhishma "flaps his cow-ears" and will not answer. "No matter what answer was given, Draupadi's position was desperate. If Bhishma told her that her husband's rights over her did not cease, that even though he became a slave she was in his power and he had the right to stake her, her slavery would have been confirmed. If Bhishma had argued that because of his slavery her husband had no more rights over her, then her plight would have been truly pitiable. Draupadi was described as *nathavati anathavat* —'with husbands, but like a widow'—and if her relation with her husband was destroyed she would have been truly widowed. From Rig-vedic times there are references to abandoned wives living wretchedly in the house of their fathers But there is not a single case in which a woman, of her own accord, had denied her husband. For such a woman, getting even a lowly position in her father's house would have been impossible, to say nothing of an honourable one." Unknowingly—some might say knowingly—Draupadi has stepped on too sensitive a toe: her words are an implicit indictment of the less-than-equal position of women in Hindu society. It takes a courageous woman with experience of five husbands to make such an accusation. The elders, true to form, let her question thunder past, and plunge in thought again. Only Vidura, Vyasa's low-caste illegitimate son by an unnamed woman in Dhritarashtra's palace, has the moral strength to exclaim that those present in the hall have insulted dharma by refusing to answer the question that Draupadi has asked.

The silence of the elders so angers Draupadi that she performs one last "duty" before she is dragged away from the assembly hall: she *namaskaras* her "elders and superiors" and begs their "forgiveness" for not doing so earlier. In the regional re-tellings and embroidered versions of the *Mahabharata*, one sees how the sarcasm is made more pointed in order to bring out the tragic poignance of the plight of Draupadi and the amoral face-saving discretion of the "gentlemen of the *sabha*."

Villi's Tamil version, for example, makes Duhshasana tie a rope to Draupadi's hair, by means of which he drags her into the hall. "Is this an echo," enquires M. V. Subramaniam in his book called *Vyasa and Variations*, "of the episode in the *Ramayana* where, according to one of the versions, Ravana, while abducting Sita, lifts her up along with the piece of earth on which she stood, lest by touching her his head should break into pieces?" In fact, Villi makes Draupadi run to Gandhari for help when Duhshasana first tries to lay hands on her. Gandhari "gives the chillingly cruel reply that it was only Draupadi's relatives who were inviting her and she had better go."

Kumara-Vyasa's Kannada version has two intriguing additions. He provides a macabre point to Draupadi's pledge that she would dip her hair in the blood of Duhshasana's ripped-open stomach by making her actually pull out his intestines and pleat her hair with them. The second addition is a delicate "touch, emphasising the doctrine of total surrender for a devotee," when about to-be-disrobed Draupadi appeals to Krishna to save her modesty. She holds on to one end of her dress with her left hand; no help comes. Then "she realises the absurdity of having any reservations when asking for divine help," lets go of her dress, and "lifts up both her hands in prayer; and it is then that the miraculous help arrives."

The help is bound to come, for three reasons. First, Draupadi prays to Krishna by saying, "Am I not related to you? Am I not your *sakhi*? Haven't you promised to help me?" Draupadi is indeed distantly related to Krishna—her mother-in-law Kunti is Krishna's aunt, by virtue of being the sister of Krishna's father Vasudeva. And the allusion to being his *sakhi*—a word whose nuances are impossible to convey in a single English equivalent—clinches the matter. Indian literature abounds in references to, and celebrations of, the man-*sakhi* relationship, which is characterised by romantic tenderness, chivalrous loyalty, and spiritualised sexual affection. In describing herself as his *sakhi*, Draupadi leaves Krishna no choice but to be a Hindu knight and protect her honour with unswerving dedication. Secondly, though there is no

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earlier record in the epic of a promise by Krishna to help Draupadi, folk legend has it that when Krishna hurled his *chakra* at Shishupala, he cut his own finger. Draupadi immediately tore a strip out of her expensive dress, and staunched the flow of blood by improvising a bandage. Krishna reciprocated at the time of her disrobing by bandaging her—she was in her period—by providing an unending swirl of cloth. The third reason: etymologically Kṛṣṇā (Draupadi) and Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) have the same root, and mean "the dark-skinned one." In metaphysical symbology, Krishna and Draupadi are reversed as Divinity and Shakti; just as Krishna is *svayambhu*, or self-born, being an *avatara* of Vishnu, so Draupadi was born by herself, as it were, out of the *yajna*-altar of Drupada (hence her other name Yajnaseni) and cannot be considered as having a biological birth.

KUNTI. Kunti is another uncommonly strong-willed lady of Vyasa's epic. Not as imperious as Gandhari perhaps, but certainly as determined. She refuses to give the child-creating mantra to her younger "co-wife" Madri because Madri, the first time, had cleverly invoked the twin Ashvins and become mother of Nakula and Sahadeva; at that rate she would exceed Kunti's three children—by three separate gods: Yudhishthira (by Dharma), Bhima (by Vayu), Arjuna (by Indra)—with a second invocation of the mantra. Kunti's personality dominates the period of the Pandavas' "exile" in Varanavata, but she uses her intelligence and influence discreetly, with a minimum of aggressiveness; so low-keyed is her manner that the unwarned reader may not even realise how effortlessly and superbly she takes it on herself to guide the fortunes of her and Madri's sons.

Three examples will give an idea of her, let us say, mode of operation.

Duryodhana employed Purochana to burn the Pandavas alive in the lacquer palace he got specially constructed for them in Varanavata. Yudhishthira gets wind of the plot from Vidura, and bides his time. He does little else, it appears. It is left to Kunti to bring matters to a head and work out the practical details of frustrating Duryodhana's plot. The text is not very communicative on this point. But this is how Iravati Karve reconstructs the counter-plan: "Kunti, as befitted the mother of the princes, kept an open house.

Every day Brahmins and hundreds of poor people enjoyed their hospitality. One such was a tribal woman who, with her five sons, came to the palace and slept there that night. The Pandavas took this opportunity to make their escape. In the middle of the night they set fire to the house and escaped through an already prepared underground tunnel. In the narrative of this incident one sees the superiority of the critical text of the *Mahabharata*. It says that 'a tribal woman, as though invited by death, came to Kunti's house that day, ate, drank liquor, and slept there'. Two later editions have the following versions. One says that 'the tribal woman was cruel and an accomplice of Purochana'. The other says that 'she was cruel and pretended to be friendly to Kunti'. For the sake of the plot and counter-plot, the tribal woman and her sons had to die. In fact, her opportune arrival must have induced the Pandavas to decide to escape on the very night that they did. The natural sequence of events was distorted by later narrators because they wanted their heroes to be above the reproach of having killed six innocent persons." The point is: Who fed the six tribals and made them drunk? Not the Pandava brothers. The text says it was Kunti. Here is a scene to parallel the gory murder of Duncan, with Kunti playing the role of an eager yet hesitant Lady Macbeth. Vyasa does not say who actually set fire to the palace. Bhima? If so, instigating Macbeth-Bhima was Kunti, bringer-forth of men-children only.

The second instance of Kunti's effective control of the situation is when Bhima, dog-tired after carrying the five through the forest, slumps down to rest. The others are also "unable to proceed a step further." This is not a giant epic event, and I felt no need to chronicle it in my condensation, but it significantly highlights an aspect of Kunti's character, because at that critical moment Kunti resorts to a sentimental ploy that Indian mothers, Hindu or non-Hindu, still tend to adopt when they want things done their way. She exclaims—no doubt slapping her forehead with the sole of her right palm—"Hai! I am Kunti; mother of five sons, and I thirst for water sitting in their midst." The desired result is immediately achieved: Bhima is instantly on his feet again—and on the go.

The third instance is her approval of Bhima's "affair" with Hidimba. Let there be no misunderstanding about this—she allows the union not because Bhima loves Hidimba (and there is not much likelihood of an Aryan Pandava eternally "loving" a tribal *rakshasa* beauty)—she *orders* Bhima to beget a *rakshasa*-son so that the Pandavas have a powerful ally when they decide to wage war against Duryodhana. Whatever else this might be, it certainly is an example of splendid foresight.

These are merely a few guidelines for deeper interpretation of the women characters in the epic. A similar method may be used to analyse the epic's men. I will take up five: Arjuna, Krishna, Shishupala, Drona, and Vidura (and, with Vidura, Yudhishthira).

ARJUNA. Arjuna's behaviour on the battlefield – his refusal to fight and kill his relatives – is nothing if not curious. It seems to be out of character. It is inspiring, of course, but baffling too. Why should a Kshatriya hesitate to do his military duty? In the belief that the answer to that might lie in the *totality* of Arjuna's character, I embarked in 1968 on a shloka-by-shloka 20-year project to transcreate the entire *Mahabharata*, hoping in the process to stumble on at least a few clues to the greatest controversy-point in Book 6 of the epic (which contains the *Bhagavad Gita*).

I have now, mid-way through the task, some glimmerings, but still not the complete answer—assuming that there *is* a complete answer, which indeed may very likely not be. Arjuna is a searching, because troubled, man, unlike his brothers who are perfectly content with conventional values and behaviour. He is the only Pandava brother whose variety of erotic adventures suggests a restless twentieth-century hero relentlessly seeking self-fulfilment through sexual satisfaction. He marries the princesses of Kalinga, Chedi, Madra, Magadha, and Yavana; in Hardwar he has a son Iravat by Ulupi, the Naga princess; in Manipura he marries Chitrangada and has a son by her named Babhruvahana; in Dvaraka he readily takes Krishna's hint and abducts and marries Krishna's sister Subhadra, who bears him a son Abhimanyu. The other, pale by comparison, exception is Bhima (who "marries" the *rakshasi* Hidimba); the three other Pandavas are happy with their common wife Draupadi, and Vyasa records no extra-marital amorous dalliance on their part.

Is it wrong then for a sensitive reader to surmise that Arjuna's mental make-up is worrying and questing, individualistic, even protestant? It is not enough to argue that all this is part of a long-term plan, that Arjuna's many liaisons are entered into with an eye on their usefulness as levers of military alliances in preparation for the anticipated conflict. This is Arjuna's nature; this is the way he is; he cannot be otherwise. He knows he cannot lose (because he possesses the invincible Gandiva bow), yet he will not fight. He prefers to be the world's first pacifist, a conscientiously objecting, bravely quaking and Quaker Hindu. To call him a "coward," as Krishna at one point does, is an injustice. In requires a very special type of courage to be "cowardly" in the Arjuna manner. The point is that Arjuna, for whatever reason, suddenly stands for *ahimsa*, while Krishna argues for killing; Arjuna in the *Gita* is, strangely, the humanist, and Krishna, strangely, the militarist. And basically there can be no reconciliation between these two fearfully opposed philosophies, philosophies which have each a very special meaning for our perplexed age.

KRISHNA. According to Robert Antoine, "the most intriguing figure in the *Mahabharata* is Krishna. In the original story, Krishna belongs to a primitive tribe of cowherds. He is unscrupulous and brutal and his cunning makes of him the Indian Ulysses. Gandhari holds him responsible for the cruel slaughter of the great war and curses him. His end is inglorious. By what process of gradual apotheosis he became the Supreme Being of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a question which, though historically difficult to solve, gives a better understanding of the Indian temperament. The myth of Krishna is not a mere poetical or imaginary idealisation. It is a projection of a deep and insatiable need of the human soul for a living God whom, when revelation is absent, man must needs seek in a human image raised above all human standards."

One does not have to agree entirely with this view to realise that the *Mahabharata*, whatever else it might be, is the Epic of Krishna, and Krishna provides a complex centre of coherence for its various elements, whether "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited." D. D. Kosambi, an eminent Marxist interpreter of Indian history and tradition, examined the great epic from the tragical-pastoral-Marxist view point in an article titled "The Historical Krishna" in

The Times of India Annual 1965. He argued that the Krishna legend passes through two phases, the first leading up to the killing of Kamsa and the founding of Dvaraka, and the second dealing with Krishna's friendship with the Pandavas and his role in the Kurukshetra war, ending with Krishna's death at the hands of his step-brother Jara, a son of Vasudeva by another wife. According to Professor Kosambi, the entire legend embodies the transition from the food-gathering forest stage of civilisation to the agricultural food-producing. Krishna's uncle Kamsa had to be killed—"In some tribes developed out of the matriarchal stage (which is normal to food-gatherers) the chief's heir is not his own son but his sister's son. Moreover, the successor to chieftainship had often to sacrifice his predecessor. This shows why Kamsa had to be killed publicly." In fact, "the supreme love of Radha finds no place in either phase of this myth because she was an eastern mother goddess. The Krishna cult had to spread as far as Bengal before it became necessary to assimilate her cult." In any case, the expulsion of the Naga Kaliya is an "act of aggression" by "food-producers" against the Nagas, who were "food-gatherers" living in forests. "Krishna, then, is not a single historical figure, but compounded of many semi-legendary heroes who helped in the formation of a new food-producing society."

If readers need to be refreshed after these two copious doses of metaphysical wish-fulfilment and sociological speculation, they can profitably consult other approaches to and interpretations of Krishna's nature, role, and message; specially recommended are W.G. Archer's *The Loves of Krishna* (1957), Milton B. Singer's *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes* (1966), Walter Spink's lyrical and evocative *Krishnamandala* (1971) and *The Quest for Krishna* (privately published, 1972), and A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's devoted *Krishna: The Supreme Personality of Godhead* Vol. 1 (1971). Krishna is inexhaustible. There is no single path into the heart of the Krishna mystery, but different paths offer different illuminations—and create different problems.

SHISHUPALA. Shishupala has a minor role to play in Book 2 but not an insignificant one. Just as Arjuna is the world's first pacifist, Shishupala is the first Indian leader to stage a political walk-out. He has the courage to speak out his mind; he is not afraid to face Krishna in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation; and he dares to march straight out of the palace when he feels that Bhishma is overdoing his praise of Krishna. His is a policy of non-cooperation with whatever and whoever he considers unjust. To get a glimpse of his character it is instructive to refer to a painting by Raja Ravi Varma, whose work was popular in the early years of our century.

Very few in these days of avant-garde and gimmicky art styles find the paintings of Ravi Varma producing any vibes at all. He has the chief demerits of nineteenth-century Victorian-style art; he can be so meticulously and photographically exact as to make "narrative realism" seem a sentimental technique. One painting by him, reproduced in the Bengali *Ashtadashaparva Mahabharata* of Kashiram Das, edited by Ramananda Chatterjee (Prabasi, Calcutta) shows him at his worst and best. It is titled "The Charges of Shishupala against Krishna in the Rajasuya Yajna."

Shishupala stands barefoot on the first step of the *sabha*-dais in a Corinthian-pillared palace. On his right is a bearded Yudhishthira seated on the throne. A handle-bar moustached Shishupala stands erect in the robes of a Rajput courtier, naked sword in his right hand. Behind him is the gallery of invited kings and chieftains, their faces expressing dismay, mockery, puzzlement, fear, and doubt. A righteous radiance of wrath seems to flash from Shishupala's eyes as he gestures with his left hand in the direction of Krishna.

Krishna, unruffled, gentle, almost serenely effeminate, apparently unconcerned, sits expressionless, staring in fact in the *other* direction. His feet too are bare, but anointed with the lustral *arghya*-offerings. His right hand restrains Arjuna's sword-brandishing arm, his left arm rests languidly on his chair.

The focus of the painting, the point of tension, is Shishupala. His youthful energy, his explicit anger, his authoritative posture suggest a moral stand that contrasts with Krishna's pleasant, cool, careless and almost uncaring grace. Bhishma extols; Shishupala objects. We know that Krishna dealt with Shishupala's objections and arguments with the most devastating counter-argument of all —a dead enemy is no enemy—he decapitated Shishupala with a throw of his fatal *chakra*. This is difficult to rationalise or excuse, because Shishupala had earlier charged that Krishna, infatuated by Shishupala's bride-to-be Rukmini, had abducted her while she was proceeding to her wedding and made her his own chief wife!

In the Tamil *Mahabharata*, Villi tries to soften the shock of Krishna's deplorable tactic by explaining who Shishupala is. According to Vyasa, when Shishupala fell, a fierce fire issued from his body. "It was as lustrous as sunlight. It paid homage to lotus-eyed world-worshipped Krishna, and entered his body." Villi says that the irascible sage Durvasas was prevented once by Vishnu's doorkeepers Jaya and Vijaya from entering Vishnu's celestial abode. He cursed them; at Vishnu's suggestion, he suggested a way out of the curse. They could have seven births as Vishnu's friends, or three as his enemies. They chose the fewer, speedier births. So they were re-born as the anti-gods Hiranya and Hiranyaksha, killed by Vishnu in his Man-Lion and Boar avataras; as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, killed by Vishnu as Rama; and as Kamsa and Shishupala, killed by Vishnu as Krishna. It would seem that Krishna, by killing Shishupala, was not simply silencing opposition; he was doing Shishupala a favour; he was fulfilling a supernatural mission, being fully and divinely himself

DRONA. Teacher-student relationships are intricate affairs, and only the naive will try to sentimentalise them. Granted that the teacher is a guru, and the pupil of the exalted personage therefore indebted in a special way to him for services rendered that are unrepayable. This does not rule out the possibility of occasional un-guru-like behaviour on the part of the teacher and un-pupil-like response from the student. Take the case of Drona and Arjuna. Drona makes up his mind that his son Ashvatthaman, who is studying under him along with the Kaurava and Pandava princes, should get special attention. His conscience does not permit him to give *different* lessons to Ashvatthaman—all pupils are equal in this respect—but it does allow him to give *extra* lessons. Here is the way it works: to the princes Drona gives long-necked jars to fill as a task, to Ashvatthaman a wide-mouthed one. Naturally Ashvatthaman gains time, arrives for lessons earlier, and receives more, though not better, instruction. This may be a small point, but Vyasa wishes to stress that it is dishonest for a teacher to show favouritism unless the pupil also works hard enough to warrant the deserving of special favour. Ashvatthaman comes early and is eager to spend time on extra lessons; but when Arjuna catches on to the trick, Drona has no objection to giving him extra time also.

Unjustifiable, however, is Drona's shabby treatment of Ekalavya, the young tribal hero-worshipper who gains excellence in archery by deriving inspiration from a clay statue of Drona which he makes with his own hands. Utterly ignoble, in this context, is Arjuna's jealousy of Ekalavya's skill. Drona was never Ekalavya's guru, except in a symbolical sense; yet he has the gumption to ask for Ekalavya's right thumb as his *guru-dakshina* or teacher-tribute, knowing that this will forever reduce Ekalavya to inferiority in archery. He does so at Arjuna's instigation. It is difficult to think of anything more petty than this joint violation of teaching and Kshatriya ethics. But Vyasa sees life steadily, and he sees it whole and unsentimentally; yet there are occasions one wishes he did not, and this is one of them. Perhaps it is just as well that undoctored details such as this are chronicled, for they prepare us for the startling occasion, after the deluge of Krishna's capital Dvaraka at the close of the epic, when Arjuna's Gandiva bow fails to function at the critical moment just as rogues and robbers attack the fleeing Vrishni refugees, mostly women and old men. "Dharma, cultivated, blesses; Dharma, violated, destroys."

Here is a lesson for teachers. What motivates a teacher to teach? It is commonly supposed that a good teacher is moved by dedication. Of course, but dedication can flexibly cover a great many weaknesses, insecurities, hankerings, pettinesses; it may even become a rationalised cloak for selfishness. Sometimes dedication is no more than a glittering, empty word. Drona, for instance, is a splendid teacher, but one can hardly say that he takes up teaching with dedication, unless dedication is restricted to mean obsessed attachment to a single, narrow-minded aim. Drona's aim is to revenge himself on king Drupada, who once insulted him in open court. The wording of Drupada's insult contains much sensible thinking on the nature of friendship. Drupada knows very well, as Drona too surely does, that Drona has come to him to seek favours. Drona is wise, but his wisdom apparently does not extend so far as to realise that school ties do not automatically develop into fast friendships, especially when the persons concerned belong to very different income and intelligence groups. He learns his lesson; but not entirely; for he starts giving the Pandavas lessons in war-skills so that he can demand from them, as teacher-tribute, the humiliation of Drupada in battle.

YUDHISHITHIRA and VIDURA. There is a shloka in Book 1 which is omitted in most recensions and which both Manmatha Nath Dutt and Kishari Mohan Ganguli do not translate in their English versions of the *Mahabharata*. Kunti is speaking to Vidura, her youngest brother-in-law: "Son of Vichitravirya, your sons the Pandavas, by your grace, are still alive. You saved them from the fire." The Sanskrit is unambiguous:

> वैचित्रवीर्य ते पुत्राः कथमिचिज्जीवितास्त्वया ।
> त्वात्प्रसादाज्जतुगृहे त्रातः प्रत्यगतास्तवा ॥

> vaicitravīrya te putrāḥ kathamicijjivitāstvayā/
> tvātprasādajjatugṛhe trātaḥ pratyagatāstavā//

Of course, *putra* can mean, loosely, "child," but the clear meaning is "son" (*put-tra*, "one who saves from the hell called *put*," that unique Hindu hell to which a sonless man is consigned). Is Vidura *like* a father to the Pandavas, or is he *really* their father? This delicate but very important detail is finely discussed by Iravati Karve in *Yuganta*, in the chapter titled "Father and Son?"

Vidura, she argues, was a *suta*, that is, he belonged, like Karna and Yuyutsu, to a special class of "never-quite-equal-to-Kshatriya males who happened to have low-caste mothers or were illegitimate sons. Vidura is Vyasa's son by a maid" (not Vichitravirya's son, as Kunti politely and euphemistically addresses him), "just as Yuyutsu is Dhritarashtra's. Vidura, like the bastard son Edmund in *King Lear*, can never aspire to legitimate inheritance; the crown will go to Pandu and Dhritarashtra, his brothers, but he has no succession rights. A silent, mysterious, self-obscuring figure, Vidura keeps himself almost deliberately in the background."

"Was there some secret buried in this outwardly serene life?" enquires Iravati Karve. "Were Vidura and Dharma (Yudhishthira) father and son? There is much in the *Mahabharata* to support this suspicion."

The evidence may not be conclusive but it is fascinating. "First of all, Kunti's sons were born of gods, yet, by the law of *bijaksetra-*

nyaya, they were acknowledged as Pandu's. Supposing it were known that Yudhishthira was Vidura's son by Kunti—after all, Vyasa says that Kunti summoned the god of justice Dharma to father her first son (and Vidura is described in the epic as an incarnation of Dharma) – his right to the kingdom would be challenged, because Vidura could not as a *suta* claim the Kuru throne. It would go automatically to the second eldest, Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana. It is imperative therefore that the right of junior levirate, by which a younger brother-in-law could father children on his childless sister-in-law, should not be publicly acknowledged in the case of Vidura's relations with Kunti.

"There are two more incidents which lend support to this contention. After Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, Kunti and Vidura, had gone to live in the forest, the Pandavas would occasionally go to visit them. On one such visit Yudhishthira did not see Vidura and he asked about him. Dhritarashtra answered, 'He is practising terrible penance, he doesn't eat or drink anything. Sometimes people see him wandering in the forest'. Just then someone happened to say that Vidura had been seen naked, dust-covered, nothing but skin and bones. Yudhishthira ran after Vidura, crying, 'Vidura, I am your dear Yudhishthira'. They both continued running until Vidura stopped under a tree deep in the forest. He leaned against the tree. Vidura fixed his unblinking eyes on Yudhishthira, and with his yogic power he entered Yudhishthira's body limb by limb. Vidura gave Yudhishthira everything—his life, his organs, his brilliance. This behaviour at the time of death is like that of father and son. In the Upanishads there is a description of what a man nearing death is to do: he should lie on the bare ground, and make his son lie on top of him, saying, 'Son, I give you my organs'. The son should reply, 'I accept'. In this way the dying man transfers all his power, wealth, and intelligence to his son. . . . Two chapters later we are told that Vyasa came to Dhritarashtra and said, 'Vidura was Dharma incarnate born to Vichitravirya's maid servant and me through my yogic powers; and he, in his turn, through yogic powers, gave birth to Yudhishthira'. If Vidura was the father of Yudhishthira, why wasn't he also called to father the other sons of Kunti?" Because of the "prevailing opinion" that a man could sleep with his brother's wife only once if the "necessity arose to create a son in his brother's name.

. . . As soon as we consider the possibility that these two might be father and son, the whole Mahabharata conflict is no longer between the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, but among the sons of all three brothers."

4. THE MESSAGE OF THE MAHABHARATA

In 1957 V. S. Sukthankar published a scholarly study titled *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. He found fault with the excessively semantic, philological and textual approaches of some Western commentators on the epic, and argued that it had a powerful, indigenous philosophical purport which needed to be appreciated within the context of the Indian tradition, and indeed could not be properly appreciated otherwise. The "meaning," message or morality of the *Mahabharata* is difficult to pin down because the epic is, as Robert Antoine points out, "a mirror of Indian life throughout several centuries, a mirror in which popular beliefs, social customs, religious practice and speculation, folklore, civil and criminal law are reflected," developed in course of time into "a vast encyclopaedia." How is one to extract a *single* message from a colossal narrative of 100,000 couplets in which at least four distinct strands can be seen woven? Accretions and interpolations notwithstanding, these four are easy to trace:

(1) "Additional bard poetry giving genealogies and the legends of other dynasties." The Savitri and the Nala-Damayanti episodes are good examples.

(2) "Brahminical myths and legends: the Brahmins soon exploited the popularity of the *Mahabharata* to impart their own teaching. Mythological accounts, narratives extolling the power of sacrifices, battles of gods and demons, exaltation of the Brahmins and prescriptions regarding the respect and worship due to Brahmins. . . ." The best example of this is, of course, the ubiquitous glorification of the Bhargava clan of Brahmins, which I have discussed earlier.

(3) "Popular fables and moral narratives teaching a much broader morality than the Brahminical positions. The jackal, the cat, the birds and other animals are the heroes of fables while, in the parables, symbolic beings represent the realities of human exis-

tence"—a fine example of the latter being the parable of the Man in the Well (also known as the parable of the Drop of Honey) with which Vidura consoles grieving Dhritarashtra in Book 17, after the Kurukshetra carnage. "Stories of self-sacrificing kings or holy hermits practising penance, stories inculcating resignation before fate and death, stories extolling the love of a mother, stories exemplifying compassion towards all beings, stories opposing to the Brahminical ideal of study and ritualism the simpler morality of detachment, are found in abundance."

(4) "Finally, very long didactic portions consisting of lengthy discourses and discussions on *niti* (worldly wisdom and politics), dharma (law and morality), and *moksha* (liberation) have considerably increased the bulk of the *Mahabharata*. Books 12 and 13 containing some 22,000 shlokas are almost exclusively didactic. Of those didactic portions the most famous is the *Bhagavad Gita* found in Book 6."

Another difficulty—message for whom? The miscellaneousness of the *Mahabharata*'s readership is a complicating factor. "The Hindu scarcely lives," noted Romesh Chunder Dutt in 1899 when the population was "two hundred millions" in India, "man or woman, high or low, educated or ignorant, whose earliest recollections do not cling round the story and the characters of the great Epics." His words apply with perfect truth today, in spite of some secularisation and the population at 600 million. "The almost illiterate oil-manufacturer or confectioner of Bengal spells out some modern translation of the *Mahabharata* to while away his leisure hour. The tall and stalwart peasantry of the North-West know of the five Pandava brothers, and of their friend the righteous Krishna. The people of Bombay and Madras cherish with equal ardour the story of the righteous war. And even the traditions and tales interspersed in the Epic, and which spoil the work as an Epic, have themselves a charm and an attraction; and the morals inculcated in these tales sink into the hearts of a naturally religious people, and form the basis of their moral education. Mothers in India know no better theme for imparting wisdom and instruction to their daughters, and elderly men know no richer storehouse for narrating tales to children."

One message—for 600 million people? Yes. However impossible and unfashionable it appears in our increasingly anti-dharma age, the message was, and is, a moral one; intensely and unmistakably didactic, in fact. "The *Mahabharata*," wrote C. Rajagopalachari in his preface to his English re-telling of the epic (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1950), "strengthens the soul and drives home—as nothing else does—the vanity of ambition and the evil and futility of anger and hatred." That is one way of summing it up, but the tone and quality of the epic's didacticism need a more detailed discussion.

A good way of starting the discussion is to listen to the views of the Sanskrit literary critic Anandavardhana of Kashmir (*circa* A.D. 9th century). In his *Dhvanyaloka* he says that Vyasa describes the epic as "Narayana-Katha" ("The Story of Narayana") because "The history of Pandavas is only the argument—the purpose is the glory of the Lord. Learn to love the Lord, and discard the ephemeral pleasures of the world." This sounds a little too simplistic but, basing his interpretation on Anandavardhana's comment, the late V. Raghavan, in an essay appended to his translation of the condensed *Mahabharata*, suggested very much the same: "Nothing less than Truth and Right, Satya and Dharma, form the theme of the great Epic. . . . When one understands this [Anandavardhana's appreciation], the huge Epic at once attains a unity of character. The Pandavas represent Dharma, which alone is the path to God; Duryodhana, his brothers and his allies represent Adharma. The story of the epic is the conflict of the two. The Lord Himself, Bhishma, Vidura and Drona try their best to save Duryodhana by pointing out to him the superiority of Dharma; but, doomed by fate, the unthinking prince ruins himself and his allies. This Dharma is the message of the Great Epic and it can hardly be missed." Dr Raghavan's capitalised ardour perhaps over-states his point; it could be argued that if Duryodhana is "doomed by fate," in what way is he responsible for his "adharma," in what way can he be held guilty of misconduct? It is instructive to keep in mind, however, that Mahatma Gandhi had a similar view of the moral message of the *Mahabharata* when he interpreted Kurukshetra allegorically as a battlefield where the two warring parties are the forces of Good (the Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (the Kauravas)—and Good is inevitably assisted to finally triumph by the grace of Divine Providence (Krishna). And R. C. Zaehner has persuasively argued the case of Gandhiji as a twentieth-century incarnation of Yudhishthira in his book titled *Hinduism*.

But Dharma, as Bhishma warned Draupadi, is subtle, and to say simply that the *Mahabharata*'s message is the ultimate victory of Dharma is to be a little too eager to find, not what is necessarily in the epic, but what one would like to see in it. I dare to say this knowing only too well that the *Mahabharata* describes itself in its very first shloka as the *kavya* of jaya or victory, and that two of its most famous shlokas contain the statements "Truth always triumphs" and "Where Dharma is, Krishna is; where Krishna is, victory is." Yet facile conclusions must be avoided; we must seriously ask ourselves what *kind* of Dharma it is that always triumphs.

In his introduction to his "English version based on selected verses" (Columbia University Press, 1965), C. V. Narasimhan was a little more specific in this matter. "Throughout the epic," he argued, "there are episodes of unnecessary violence, net only violence in the physical sense but also violence to all human feelings as, for example, when Bhima fulfils his terrible vow of drinking the blood of Dushasana. At the same time it can be maintained that while there is so much preoccupation with violence and revenge, the essential theme of the epic is peace and reconciliation. Three missions are exchanged and every effort is made to avert war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It is only when all such efforts have been exhausted that there is the ultimate resort to force."

On the subject of reconciliation, Dr Narasimhan says "the central episode" is the one in Book 17 in which, "by the grace of the holy Vyasa," the dead heroes emerge from the sacred Ganga "free from all animosity and pride, anger and jealousy." . . . "Son met with father or mother, wife with husband, brother with brother, and friend with friend. At last 'they renounced all enmity and became established in friendship'." The same "element of reconciliation" occurs in Book 18, "when the warriors meet in Heaven where there is no rancour or malice."

Indeed, "this emphasis on the theme of peace and reconciliation is natural and understandable, because it is only a reflection of the hallowed Indian benediction: 'Peace, peace, peace!' (Om, Shantih, Shantih, Shantih!). It may also be said to have a special application for our troubled times when (like the Pandavas and the Kauravas) great nations vie with each other in lining up alliances and mastering the art of missilery." (Dr Narasimhan was

Under Secretary of the United Nations when he wrote these lines). "But, as the Pandavas realised even before the fighting began, there is a universal lesson for all to read, which is spelt out by Yudhishthira in Book 5: 'In all cases, war is evil. Who that strikes is not struck in return? Victory and defeat, O Krishna, are the same to one who is killed. Defeat is not very much better than death, I think; but he whose side gains victory also surely suffers some loss'."

Who would have guessed that the great epic of war is dedicated to the proposition that "in all cases, war is evil?" What would P. Sensarma make of such a conclusion? His fine book, *Kurukshetra War—A Military Study* (Naya Prakash, Calcutta, 1975) is a carefully documented presentation of the theory and practice of warfare as presented in Vyasa's epic, and almost leads one to conclude that the tale is a celebration of war and military science! In the foreword, General K. M. Cariappa recommends it as "having military value to the present generation of soldiers and politicians," and it was favourably reviewed under the titled "Military Man's *Mahabharata*" by General J. N. Chaudhuri. If all war indeed is evil, why did Krishna not disallow this particular war? How can Good ever triumph, without use of force, if Evil remains viciously and unbendingly adamant? I do not think the central message of the *Mahabharata* can be reduced to this doctrine of war-avoidance at any cost; total non-violence as a corollary of the philosophy of absolute pacifism does not seem to be the sum of Vyasa's accumulated wisdom. One way of discussing this is to see it in relation to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence.

When Gandhiji was detained in the Aga Khan palace, he wrote out three Sanskrit words in an exercise book in Gujarati script, and made Kasturba copy them out in an attempt to teach his wife the letters of the alphabet. The words were: "ahimsa paramo dharma" ("The prime duty is non-violence"). This is a weak translation because the word *dharma* has many nuances and cannot be exactly Englished, but it will suffice for the point I am going to make.

Not many are aware of the source of these three important words. In the Pauloma section of Book 1 of the *Mahabharata*, the furious prince Ruru takes a vow to kill all snakes that cross his path because one of them stung and killed his bride-to-be Pramadvara a few days before the date of her wedding. He comes across a *dundhuba*—a non-poisonous snake-lizard—and raises his staff in order to kill him. Cornered, the *dundhuba* says, "Ahiṃsā paramo dharma; sarvaprāṇabhṛtāṃ smrtaḥ" which means "The prime duty is non-violence; look on all creatures equally."

Now, Ruru is a Brahmin, and the snake-lizard is reminding him that Brahmins are not supposed to assault strangers. Also, he is defenceless; and a defenceless person's only weapon is persuasion—if, that is, the attacker will pause and listen. A few shlokas later, the snake-lizard says that violence is the business of a Kshatriya. The point is that he does succeed in saving himself. That is fine; non-poisonous snake-lizards have every right not to be harmed. But what about poisonous snakes? And what about snakes-in-the-grass?

The *Mahabharata* passage says nothing about total ahimsa. All it suggests is that, if you are attacked and have no means of defending yourself, you should try to appeal to the aggressor's moral sense, or you will be dead, which is not a very agreeable state for a living person to be in.

Was this Gandhiji's idea of ahimsa? I do not think so. There is no evidence that he knew the context of his famous three words. It is likely that this context was at some time or other indicated to him; but if so, he chose to interpret the epic's "message" to suit his own philosophy of life and action. On 11 August 1920 he wrote in *Young India*, "I am not a visionary: I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for the *rishis* and saints. It is meant for the common people as well." To the common man this must surely appear as very unpractical sentiment. But Gandhiji's statements were not impulsive bits of airy advice—and it is interesting to see what he could have meant by this particular statement.

It seems that the *dundhuba*'s words did influence the Mahatma a great deal. In *Young India*, in July 1921, he wrote again, "My business is to refrain from doing any violence myself, and to induce by persuasion and service as many of God's creatures as I can to join me in the belief and practice." And in the *Harijan*, 18 January 1942, just before he began the Quit India movement, he explained, "My resistance to war does not carry me to the point of thwarting those who wish to take part in it. I reason with them. I put before them the better way and leave them to make the choice."

This is the *dundhuba*'s way: reason and persuasion. But there are some intriguing implications here that need clarification. Gandhiji assumes that all people are open to reason, whereas it is obvious that violence is employed mostly by those who have temporarily suspended or, with deliberate intent for a large stretch of time, surrendered rational thinking. Gandhiji says unequivocally that non-violence is the "better way"; but is it then never permissible to use violence to convince a fanatic, a terrorist, a dictator bent on genocide, or a madman?

Gandhiji does advise the use of violence, but in one context only. "I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. . . . I want both the Hindus and the Mussalmans to cultivate the cool courage, to die without killing. But if one has not that courage, I want him to cultivate the art of killing and being killed, rather than in a cowardly manner flee from danger. For the latter in spite of his flight does commit mental *himsa*. He flees because he has not the courage to be killed in the act of killing."

This leads us to the predicament of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra: to fight or not to fight, to kill or to lay down arms? Even those who argue that the *Gita* is an interpolation do not question the rich moral insights provided in the colloquy between Krishna and Arjuna. Interestingly enough, if there is a central message in the epic it is very likely embedded in the *Gita*.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic of action, and the *Gita* endorses action. "Wake up!" says Vyasa. "Let good men shake off sloth." And Krishna tells Arjuna, "To work is better than not to work . . . Your duty is to work. . . . Do what must be done. . . ." Fight, in other words, but not for the sake of victory. It is a hard lesson to teach, but Krishna teaches it throughout the *Gita* , and with poetic beauty in Canto 15 of the sacred dialogue when he describes a "cosmic fig-tree" whose roots are in the sky, whose fruits are on earth. "Slice this fig-tree with non-attachment," he advises Arjuna, thus ending your karma and obtaining *moksha*. The co-ordinates of *moksha* are not given, because freedom, to be truly free, can have no limiting co-ordinates, no how-to-achieve-it gimmickry.

It is my belief that the core moral of the *Mahabharata* is to show the primacy, in human life, of such action. This "cosmic fig-tree" is a metaphor for one of Hinduism's profoundest, subtlest, and strongest beliefs, a metaphor that has found its way into Indian village folklore as the *kalpa-taru*, the wish-fulfilling tree. Inside the Jagannatha Temple in Puri, Orissa, is a wish-fulfilling tree. The Bengali folk singer Ram Prosad Sen has a song that goes: "Let's go, my mind, and pluck the four fruits." These are the fruits that hang from the wish-fulfilling tree. Christopher Isherwood re-tells the *kalpa-taru* parable in his anthology *Vedanta for the West*; I narrated it in my introductory essay "On Understanding India" to Barbara Harrison's *Learning About India* (1977). It is worth repeating, if only because it is exquisitely simple.

The proverbial benevolent uncle turns up in a village and finds his nephews and nieces and their friends playing in a thatched hut with toys and make-do twig-and-rag dolls. "Why play with these?" he asks. "Outside is the *kalpa-taru*, the Wish-Fulfilling Tree. Stand under it, and wish. It will give you anything you want."

The children don't believe him. They are smart enough to know that the world is not structured to give us whatever we want. We have to struggle very hard for the smallest reward—and, of course, others always seem to get the plums, for they have what is known as "connections."

They smile knowingly. The uncle leaves.

No sooner has he left, however, than they rush to the Tree, and start wishing. They want sweets—and they get stomach aches. They want toys—and they get boredom. Bigger and better toys—bigger and better boredom.

This worries them. It is very upsetting Something must be wrong somewhere. Someone is tricking them. What is this unpleasant unsuspected unwanted extra that always tags along with the sweets and the toys?

What they haven't realised yet is that the Wish-Fulfilling Tree is the vast, the enormously generous but totally unsentimental cosmos. It will give you exactly what you want—"this world is your wish-fulfilling cow," says Krishna in Canto 3 of the *Gita*—and with it its built-in opposite. The tragedy of the world is not that we don't get what we want, but that we always get exactly what we want—along with its built-in opposite. Wish it, think it, dream it, do it—you've got it! and you've had it. That's it—having and being had. (If only the Pandavas had known that before they started wishing and planning for success!)

So the children grow up and become, euphemistically, "young adults." They really are just a bunch of over-grown kids, all trapped and clamouring under the Wish-Fulfilling Tree. Instead of sweets and toys—childish trifles!—they now crave Sex, Fame, Money, and Power, the four sweet fruits that dangle from the Tree. Bittersweet fruits. There are, truly speaking, no other fruits. There is nothing else to be had.

They reach out and bite each of these four fruits and get the same bitter after-taste of disappointment and disillusionment. But they go on wishing, because there seems to be little else that one can do under the Wishing Tree. Creatures come and go; the Tree is always there, always granting favours with frustrations attached.

They grow old and are stretched out under the Tree, lying on their death cots. Pathetic old men and women, politely referred to as "*guru-jana*," "respected elders," "senior citizens." They lie huddled in three security-seeking groups. The first group whispers, "It's all a hoax. The world's a farce." Fools; they have learnt nothing.

The second huddle murmurs, "We made the wrong wishes. This time we'll make the right wish." Bigger fools; they have learnt less than nothing.

The third group is the most foolish. "What's the point living? Nothing makes sense. We want to die."

The obliging Tree quickly grants their last desire. They die—and they get the in-born built-in opposite of the death-wish—they are re-born--and under the same Tree, for there is no other place to get born or re-born in.

The parable does not end here. It speaks of a lame boy. The young cripple also hobbled to the Tree, but was shoved aside by his more agile friends. So he crawled back to the hut and gazed at the marvellous Tree from the small window, waiting for his friends to finish and make room for him to stand under the Tree and make the wish that lame boys make. What he saw from the window awed and almost unnerved him.

He saw a tragic scene enacted in front of him. He saw his companions wanting sweets and getting stomach aches, grabbing toys and getting bored. He saw them scrambling for other toys and sweets—Sex, Fame, Money, and Power—and getting their opposites, and agonising—and not realising the cause of their anguish. He saw them divided into three groups—the Cynics, the self-appointed Wise Guys, and the hope-bereft Death-Wishers. He saw this with unforgettable clarity, with the poignant brilliant sharpness of naked truth.

The spectacle of this cosmic swindle, this *lila*, so *impressed* him that he stood stunned in brief, lucid bafflement. A divine comedy, a divine tragicomedy, the panoramic cycle of karma—that's what it all was. A gush of compassion welled in his heart for the victims of karma, and in that gush of compassion, though he wanted to wish, the lame boy *forgot* to wish. He had sliced the cosmic fig-tree with non-attachment.

He stood outside the orbit of the world's ambivalence. He was free.

He had, in expressing spontaneous compassion, not done the planned good act, which earns heaven for its doer and leads to better re-birth. The Hindu heaven is a temporary state, because heaven is really a punishment for good deeds.

Nor had he done the bad act, which earns hell, again temporary, after which one is born again. The Hindu tradition feels that no crime is so bad as to deserve an eternity of punishment.

He had not done the absurd act, either, by opting, as the desperate do, to cop out of the system. Stop the world—I'm getting off! After all, my life is my life, and I can put an end to it whenever I want to; there's no one really to stop me.

The lame boy had sliced the cosmic fig-tree by doing the "pure act," the ultimate act of dharma, the act of gratuitous and concerned compassion, which gets no reward or punishment, since it lies outside the give-and-take set-up. The pure act—in the words of Krishna, *nishkama karma*—is its own reward. Until the gesture of the pure act is made, and until it is put into practice, we are all trapped under the Wish-Fulfilling Tree mentioned in the *Gita* and the *Katha-Upanishad* (II : 3 : 1). The cripple did not *consciously* know this. He stood, in the healing shadow of his compassion and beyond the pale of the Tree, marvelling at the complex and wondrous and dread fabric of the universe, and *forgetting* to wish. Forgetting—not remembering to forget. He was the "free," the serene man, the genuine doer of dharma and the right candidate for *moksha*, untouched by the world's ambivalence and by the varieties of heaven and hell the world so copiously provides.

This is what Vyasa means when he says, in the memorable shloka at the close of his epic, that he lifts up his hands and shouts that from Dharma comes Artha and Kama—and no one listens. In compassion lies the meaning of life, and because both the Kauravas and Pandavas lacked such compassion they destroyed themselves. Vyasa does not pause to ask why no one listens.

Could the answer be that such dharmic compassion is very difficult, almost impossible for the common man to achieve? Krishna says in the *Gita* in Canto 18: "Act one must—the body compels it—true giving-up is renunciation of fruits." Yes, but can the average human being ever aspire to give up the fruits of action? Is the carrot dangled by Krishna (and Vyasa) ever reachable by the plodding, ego-ridden efforts of mankind? Is Hinduism again talking so big and positing goals so idealistic that, with the exception of saints and geniuses, all must despair of success? It is reasonable, is it practical to expect Arjuna, trained as a Kshatriya, expert in the arts of war, to fight without desire to win? For a brief moment Arjuna does show an extraordinary compassion—but it is much too brief and all too extraordinary.

Dr J. A. B. Van Buitenen, who died in 1979, says in his introduction to Book V of his unfinished translation of *The Mahabharata*, Volume 3 (University of Chicago Press, 1978) that the "*Bhagavad Gita* has discovered a new ethical justification for the act, which is this war: it is a very subtle agreement: Yes, this act is a task that cannot be shirked. And *if* this act be done as task, not for the rewards it yields, it shall have no unfavourable consequences for the soul." It is a very subtle argument indeed, and even subtler and more important is the concept of active compassion which overshadows it. Krishna does win the first round—he is able to get Arjuna to fight and kill—but the end of the *Mahabharata* underlines the futility of revengeful warfare and restores the validity of Arjuna's "compassion." Such is the essential structure and message of India's Doomsday Epic: Without compassion all is lost.

5. TRANSLATING THE MAHABHARATA

Like an awkward bumble-bee
he lands on the flower;
the delicate stem bends
he pushes his way between rows of petals
which are like dictionary pages

and he tries to get in
where the scent and the sweetness are
and although he has a cold
and no taste
he perseveres
until his head bangs
against a yellow pistil
but here it ends
one simply cannot reach
through the head of a flower
to its roots
so the bumble-bee gets out
very proud
humming loudly:
I have been inside

And to those who don't quite believe him
he shows his nose
yellow with pollen

—"On Translating Poetry" by Zbigniew Herbert in *Polish Writing Today*, Penguin Books

Every age gets the translation it deserves, and often the time-span of an age for purposes of effective communication is no more than thirty years, even less, roughly a generation. A generation is lucky if it gets the translation that most reflects and expresses its interests and needs. It is trivial and irrelevant to condemn earlier translations for not sounding satisfactory to us. As best one should compare only contemporary versions of the same text; even that is not always desirable, because different translators aim at different groups of readers with different tastes. One does one's job as best as one can, and moves on. Some translate; some transcreate; some, with the best of intentions, transcorrupt. By the time Time passes an evaluating judgment, new and fresh versions are again needed—and the cycle starts again.

An example of the way in which translators, sometimes consciously but mostly unconsciously, mould their versions to the esthetic and moral taste of their age can be seen in Edward Fitzgerald's handling of "sensitive" material in *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. The famous quatrain,

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
    Beside me singing in the wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were paradise enow.

conjures up, if the numerous illustrators of the *Rubaiyat* are to be believed, a charmingly conventional romantic picture: an oasis, a shy girl in Samarkand silk singing to a languidly reclining lover who holds a book of poems in his hands and a woeful expression on his face and is waiting for her to end so that he can recite a love poem to her. A regular feast for the gently erotic Victorian imagination! Unfortunately, such a scene, however sensuously stimulating to the nineteenth century British reader, must surely have been appalling to the Middle Eastern imagination. A girl—an unveiled girl—and a boy together—unheard of and unthought of! The original is quite different:

Let me have a loaf of fine wheaten flour,
A flagon of wine, and a thigh of mutton,
    And beside me, amid the desolation, a comely
    youth—
This is happiness no Sultan's palace holds.

Conspicuously missing are the "Book of Verses" and the sylvan "Bough" of a Hampstead garden (date-palms don't have boughs); the loaf is specified as being of "fine wheaten flour," and the "jug" of wine is really a goodly-sized "flagon"; and, most important, the girl is obviously a "comely youth"—lads being more acceptable than lasses in Middle Eastern mores where trysts in oases were involved. To Fitzgerald's credit it should be pointed out that he never said it was a girl—he used the ambiguous "thou" and left it to his intelligent reader's taste to fill in the sex; the ambiguous person could even be Saki, the wine-bearer.

I mean that it is imperative for a translator to bow to the culture of the age in which, or for which, he is writing—and, with very rare exceptions, one is always translating only for one's contemporaries. Creative writing may be done for a hundred years hence; not translation. In the process of conforming to the implied or explicit esthetic and other standards of one's age, humorous and even ridiculous translation can result. For instance, the King James Version and the American Standard version of *Isaiah 6 : 1* report that Isaiah the prophet saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, "and his train filled the temple." The James Moffatt translation says "his trailing robes spread over the temple floor." Actually, a more accurate translation of the Hebrew would be "his buttocks filled the temple." One member of the New English Bible Committee wanted to translate the word accurately, but the majority felt that "buttocks" or even "hind parts" would not be well received, and they settled for the innocuous mistranslation. Apparently, it is still bad religious manners in our increasingly irreligious century to refer to the Deity in particularised anthropomorphic vocabulary. An even more curious example is the deliberate South African mistranslation made by Dutch Christians of *The Song of Songs 1 : 5*; the King James Version has "I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem"; and the Dutch African Version alters it to "I am comely and burnt brown by the sun," because few white people in the stronghold of apartheid would accept the notion that a black person could be comely.

In other words, it is not unlikely that in my condensed version of the epic the reader may spot concessions made to the mores of our age, specially the mores that are part of the Indian tradition.

The *Mahabharata* is the greatest work of literature that India possesses; it commands and deserves the highest respect. I have approached it with that respect without, I hope, surrendering my critical faculties. My medium is English, but what matters is not so much the language as the values enshrined in the epic; I have tried to put across these values with a discriminating, transparent simplicity of style, adopting an intelligently genuflecting attitude to the vast culture that Vyasa so richly documents and expresses. If readers after this century discover this bias on my part, I can defend myself in advance only by arguing that sufficient to each age is the bias thereof and, instead of pointing to the shortcomings of an earlier age's translators, it is a more rewarding pursuit to weed out the ones in our own. R. C. Dutt and Edward Fitzgerald were right for their age; one hopes and prays that one is right for one's own.

Secondly, I have tried in my transcreation to bring out the literary quality of the *Mahabharata* as a fast-paced poetic narrative. It is a story, after all, though many forget that it is a story full of poetry. Therefore, I mix verse high with prose flow. Where I feel the Sanskrit needs an intense, imaginative rendering—a transcreating—I resort to free verse; where the narrative and didactic parts predominate, I use prose. This is not an inflexible rule, but it serves as a way of achieving whatever results I wanted to achieve in my condensed version. Though the die-hard pundits may not admit this, the *Mahabharata* is full of prolix, overdetailed, repetitive, preachy and even contradictory passages—and it is full of beauty, delicacy, economy, and haunting poignance. Any translator will have to depend on his intuitions and insights to see which is which, and where; refusal or inability to do so will result in the perpetration of an irreparable injustice to the multitonal subtlety of Vyasa by rendering his masterpiece in a bland, urbane, scholarly pseudostyle.

Thirdly, the *spoken* quality of the epic is something that must be conveyed. The *Mahabharata* is now written, but it was, and remains, in the Indian tradition an *oral* epic. I have used a colloquial, speakable form of English to suggest this. This essential *Mahabharata* quality was vividly brought home to me when I began reading my shloka-by-shloka version in English, with significant Sanskrit shlokas interspersed, for a set of stereophonic cassettes brought out by Writers Workshop, Calcutta, that will cover the entire *Mahabharata* in 250 hours of speaking and chanting. How the ancient story-telling *suta* would have loved cassettes! I have in my translation stressed the dramatic, the picturesque, the mythic, the warmly human, and the conspicuously poetic because these elements are the soul of the oral tradition.

The ultimate test, however, the touchstone as it were, of any translation is its handling of what I call epiphany-points. These are passages, usually not over-long, that are found in every major epic of the world, where the narrative seems to miraculously lift into a sudden experience of the unsaid and almost unsayable mystery of human relationship, or where it bursts into an ecstatic celebration of some spiritual discovery, or where it describes with memorable lyricism some unsuspected exquisiteness of the beauty of nature. One such passage in the epic of Vyasa is the Karna-Kunti episode, a poignant piece of tight drama, carefully constructed, near-perfect in its delicacy, brevity, simplicity, and intensity. It fascinated Rabindranath Tagore so deeply that he wrote a poem on it. Kunti goes to meet her son Karna, whom she abandoned as a baby, to implore him not to harm her other sons on the battlefield. In the Poona Critical Recension, it is the text of Book 5: 142: 27 to 5: 144: 26, and in my translation it begins with "On the bank of the Ganga," and ends "They parted, going different ways.'(204-206)

आत्मजस्य ततस्तस्य घृणिनः सत्यसङ्गिनः ।
गङ्गातीरे पृथाशृण्वदुपाध्ययननिस्वनम् ॥ 27
प्राङ् मुखस्योर्ध्वबाहोः सा पर्यतिष्ठत पृष्ठतः ।
जप्यावसानं कार्यार्थं प्रतीक्षन्ती तपस्विनी ॥ 28
अतिष्ठत्सूर्यतापार्ता कर्णस्योत्तरवाससि ।
कौरव्यपत्नी वार्ष्णेयी पद्ममालेव शुष्यती ॥ 29
आ पृष्ठतापाज्जस्वा स परिवृत्य यतव्रतः ।
दृष्ट्वा कुन्तीमुपातिष्ठदभिवाद्य कृताञ्जलिः ।
यथान्यायं महातेजा मानी धर्मभृतां वरः । 30
इति श्रीमहाभारते उद्योगपर्वणि
द्विचत्वारिंशदधिकशततमोऽध्यायः ॥ 142 ॥

143

कर्ण उवाच ।

राधेयोऽहमाधिरथिः कर्णस्त्वामभिवादये ।
प्राप्ता किमर्थं भवती ब्रूहि किं करवाणि ते ॥ 1

कुन्त्युवाच ।

कौन्तेयस्त्वं न राधेयो न तवाधिरथः पिता ।
नासि सूतकुले जातः कर्ण तद्विद्धि मे वचः ॥ 2
कानीनस्त्वं मया जातः पूर्वजः कुक्षिणा धृतः ।
कुन्तिभोजस्य भवने पार्थस्त्वमसि पुत्रक ॥ 3
प्रकाशकर्मा तपनो योऽयं देवो विरोचनः ।
अजीजनत्त्वां मय्येष कर्ण शस्त्रभृतां वरम् ॥ 4
कुण्डली बद्धकवचो देवगर्भः श्रिया वृतः ।
जातस्त्वमसि दुर्धर्ष मया पुत्र पितुर्गृहे ॥ 5
स त्वं भ्रातृनसंबुद्ध्वा मोहाद्यदुपसेवसे ।
धार्तराष्ट्रान्न तद्युक्तं त्वयि पुत्र विशेषतः ॥ 6
एतद्धर्मफलं पुत्र नराणां धर्मनिश्चये ।
यत्तुष्यन्त्यस्य पितरो माता चाप्येकदर्शिनी ॥ 7
अर्जुनेनार्जितां पूर्वं हृतां लोभादसाधुभिः ।
आच्छिद्य धार्तराष्ट्रेभ्यो भुङ्क्ष्व यौधिष्ठरीं श्रियम् ॥ 8
अद्य पश्यन्तु कुरवः कर्णार्जुनसमागमम् ।
सौभ्रात्रेण तदालक्ष्य संनमन्तामसाधवः ॥ 9
कर्णार्जुनौ वै भवतां यथा रामजनार्दनौ ।
असाध्यं किं नु लोके स्याद्युवयोः सहितात्मनोः ॥ 10
कर्ण शोभिष्यसे नूनं पञ्चभिर्भ्रातृभिर्वृतः ।
वेदैः परिवृतो ब्रह्मा यथा वेदाङ्गपञ्चमैः ॥ 11
उपपन्नो गुणैः श्रेष्ठो ज्येष्ठः श्रेष्ठेषु बन्धुषु ।
सूतपुत्रेति मा शब्दः पार्थस्त्वमसि वीर्यवान् ॥ 12

इति श्रीमहाभारते उद्योगपर्वणि
त्रिचत्वारिंशदधिकशततमोऽध्यायः ॥ 143 ॥

144

वैशंपायन उवाच ।

ततः सूर्यान्निश्चरितां कर्णः शुश्राव भारतीम् ।
दुरत्ययां प्रणयिनीं पितृवद्भास्करेरिताम् ॥ 1

सत्यमाह पृथा वाक्यं कर्ण मातृवचः कुरु।
श्रेयस्ते स्यान्नरव्याघ्र सर्वमाचरतस्तथा ॥ 2
एवमुक्तस्य मात्रा च स्वयं पित्रा च भानुना।
चचाल नैव कर्णस्य म~~तिः सत्य~~धृतेस्तदा ॥ 3

कर्ण उवाच ।

न ते न श्रद्दधे वाक्यं क्षत्रिये भाषितं त्वया।
धर्मद्वारं ममैतत्स्यान्नियोगकरणं तव ॥ 4
अकरोन्मयि यत्पापं भवती सुमहात्ययम्।
अवकीर्णोऽस्मि ते तेन तद्यशःकीर्तिनाशनम् ॥ 5
अहं च क्षत्रियो जातो न प्राप्तः क्षत्रसत्क्रियाम्।
त्वत्कृते किं नु पापीयः शत्रुः कुर्यान्ममाहितम् ॥ 6
क्रियाकाले त्वनुक्रोशमकृत्वा त्वमिमं मम।
हीनसंस्कारसमयमद्य मां समचूचुदः ॥ 7
न वै मम हितं पूर्वं मातृवच्चेष्टितं त्वया।
सा मां संबोधयस्यद्य केवलात्महितैषिणी ॥ 8
कृष्णेन सहितात्को वै न व्यथेत धनंजयात्।
कोऽद्य भीतं न मां विद्यात्पार्थानां समितिं गतम् ॥ 9
अभ्राता विदितः पूर्वं युद्धकाले प्रकाशितः।
पाण्डवान्यदि गच्छामि किं मां क्षत्रं वदिष्यति ॥ 10
सर्वकामैः संविभक्तः पूजितश्च सदा भृशम्।
अहं व धार्तराष्ट्राणां कुर्यां तदफलं कथम् ॥ 11
उपनह्य परैर्वैरं ये मां नित्यमुपासते।
नमस्कुर्वन्ति च सदा वसवो वासवं यथा ॥ 12
मम प्राणेन ये शत्रूञ्शक्ताः प्रतिसमासितुम्।
मन्यन्तेऽद्य कथं तेषामहं भिन्द्यां मनोरथम् ॥ 13
मया प्लवेन संग्रामं तितीर्षन्ति दुरत्ययम्।
अपारे पारकामा ये त्यजेयं तानहं कथम् ॥ 14
अयं हि कालः संप्राप्तो धार्तराष्ट्रोपजीविनाम्।
निर्वेष्टव्यं मया तत्र प्राणानपरिरक्षता ॥ 15
कृतार्थाः सुभृता ये हि कृत्यकाल उपस्थिते।
अनवेक्ष्य कृतं पापा विकुर्वन्त्यनवस्थिताः ॥ 16
राजकिल्बिषिणां तेषां भर्तृपिण्डापहारिणाम्।
नैवायं न परो लोको विद्यते पापकर्मणाम् ॥ 17

धृतराष्ट्रस्य पुत्राणामर्थे योत्स्यामि ते सुतैः ।
बलं च शक्ति चास्थाय न वै त्वय्यनृतं वदे ।। 18
आनृशंस्यमथो वृत्तं रक्षन्सत्पुरुषोचितम् ।
अतोऽर्थकरमप्येतन्न करोम्यद्य ते वचः ।। 19
न तु तेऽयं समारम्भो मयि मोघो भविष्यति ।
वध्यान्विषह्यान्संग्रामे न हनिष्यामि ते सुतान् ।
युधिष्ठिरं च भीमं च यमौ चैवार्जुनादृते ।। 20
अर्जुनेन समं युद्धं मम यौधिष्ठिरे बले ।
अर्जुनं हि निहत्याजौ संप्राप्तं स्यात्फलं मया ।।
यशसा चापि युज्येयं निहतः सव्यसाचिना ।। 21
न ते जातु नशिष्यन्ति पुत्राः पश्च यशस्विनि ।
निरर्जुनाः सकर्णा वा सार्जुना वा हते मयि ।। 22

वैशंपायन उवाच ।

इति कर्णवचः श्रुत्वा कुन्ती दुःखात्प्रवेपती ।
उवाच पुत्रमाश्लिष्य कर्णं धैर्यादकम्पितम् ।। 23
एवं वै भाव्यमेतेन क्षयं यास्यन्ति कौरवाः ।
यथा त्वं भाषसे कर्ण दैवं तु बलवत्तरम् ।। 24
त्वया चतुर्णां भ्रातृणामभयं शत्रुकर्शन ।
दत्तं तत्प्रतिजानीहि संगरप्रतिमोचनम् ।। 25
अनामयं स्वस्ति चेति पृथाथो कर्णमब्रवीत् ।
तां कर्णोऽभ्यवदत्प्रीतस्ततस्तौ जग्मतुः पृथक् ।। 26
इति श्रीमहाभारते उद्योगपर्वणि
चतुश्चत्वारिंशदधिकशततमोऽध्यायः ।। 144 ।।

The haunting *karuna-rasa*, the flavour of compassion in this episode needs a sensitive translating approach, and it is interesting to see how scholarly and competent translators go about providing sensitive versions. In Section 142:30 the second line is:

dṛṣṭvā kuntīmupatiṣṭhadabhivādya kṛtāñjaliḥ.

The key phrase here is *kṛtāñjali*, and not just because it is a Hindu manner of respectful greeting for which there is no English equivalent. *Añjali*, according to the Sanskrit Dictionary of Monier-Williams, means "the open hands placed side by side and slightly hollowed (as if by a beggar to receive food; hence when raised to the forehead, a mark of supplication)." The line is simple enough: "Having seen Kunti, he turned, and waited, doing *añjali*." V. Raghavan has: "He bowed to her and with folded hands stood ready to serve her." Shanta Rameshwar Rao has: "He turned round at last and greeted her courteously." C. Rajagopalachari omits this line altogether. J. A. B. Van Buitenen makes it: "He turned around and saw Kunti. He saluted her and waited for her to speak with folded hands, as was proper " (This is slightly ambiguous, because it could also be read to mean that Karna "saluted" Kunti and then waited for her to speak with *her* hands folded—which is not the case.) *Añjali*, the form of greeting that Karna gave to his mother Kunti, is at the root of all these approximations, because it is a peculiarly deferential and self-effacing recognition of another's presence. Professor Van Buitenen tries to indicate this extreme filial yet distant deference by making Karna ask, a shloka later, "Why has your ladyship come?" But an Indian son using "your ladyship" for his mother when the text warrants no such phrase does sound decidedly odd, despite the special circumstances in this particular case.

Take Section 144:6 line 1:

ahaṁ ca kṣatriyo jāto na prāptaḥ kṣatrasatkriyāṁ.

The troublesome word here is *kṣatrasatkriyāṁ*. Every Hindu knows what *satkriyāṁ* means: the entire complex of rituals and observances due to a member of any of the upper castes. The line can be literally translated "Though I am born Kshatriya, I never received Kshatriya sacraments"—though the word "sacraments" has clearly a Christian connotation. Karna is speaking to his mother and accusing her of denying him his fundamental caste rites—which are also his rights. Professor Van Buitenen translates it: "Born a Kshatriya, I have not yet received the respect due to a baron." Baron?—I cannot imagine any Hindu in his right senses ever using such a sentence. C. Rajagopalachari is closer to the Indian spirit: "You deprived me of all that was my birthright as a Kshatriya. . . ." Surely Webster's Third International Dictionary can help us out. It has the perfect word: samskara. Karna is referring to the samskaras which he never received because his mother deserted him when he was still a baby. Webster's Third defines samskara as "a purificatory Hindu ceremony"; Webster's Second, that indispensable tome, says samskara is "the twelve (sometimes forty) purificatory ceremonies, or rites of passage, of Hinduism's three upper castes, as, of conception, name giving, marriage." Why not translate the line simply as: "I was born Kshatriya, but you deprived me of my samskaras"?

One last instance: Kunti's parting words to Karna are a Hindu mother's poignant, reluctant blessing to a strong-willed son. They occur in the last but one line of the extract:

anamāyaṁ svasti ceti pṛthātho karṇamabravit.

Literally, " 'Live long and prosper!' Kunti said to Karna." Kunti says this, knowing very well that if Karna lives long and prospers, her other sons are in danger. But what else can she, as a mother, say? V.Raghavan translates this as: "Wishing welfare and bidding farewell. . . ." C. Rajagopalachari turns it almost into a Christian benediction: "May God bless him." Shanta Rameshwar Rao has: "May the God bless you!" And Professor Van Buitenen has the business-like "Good health and good luck!" True, *anamāyaṁ* means "free from disease, healthy, salubrious," but in context the words have a far deeper meaning than a request to keep well or to keep good health. True, *svasti* means "well-being, fortune, success, luck, prosperity," but Svasti is also sometimes personified as a goddess (Svasti-devi), and "Good luck!" is too tame in this context. It is inconceivable that an Indian mother would use those English words in that situation, unless she meant them a little ironically or even facetiously—which Kunti is not doing at all.

What is crucial is the epiphany of the passage, its emotional heart. This is the real problem before the translator or transcreator, and conveying it accurately is what translation or transcreation is all about. We all have different notions of accuracy. To say this is merely to admit that translation is an act of humility, and no translator can say he succeeds better than another because, by the time objective evaluation is possible, he should preferably be, and usually is, dead, along with his colleagues and contemporaries. I am only trying to indicate what I have tried to do, knowing that approximation, betrayal and even dismal failure haunt the whole business of translation. All one can show, after all, is one's nose yellow with pollen.

The First Book:
The Beginnings

Let us utter the sacred syllable *Om*;
let us bow to Narayana and to Nara,
 the first and noblest mortal;
let us bow to Sarasvati, goddess of learning;
let us pray for success. May success attend us!

We bow to Brahma,
 incorruptible, known and unknown, eternal;
We bow to Brahma,
who is what is and what is not;
Brahma, maker of high and low,
 the unfathomable one;
Brahma who is Vishnu,
 who loves, and is love, and takes our love;
Brahma who is Shiva,
 lord of creation,
 god of fixity and guide in flux.

What follows is the tale of Vyasa,
 great Vyasa, deserver of respect;
a tale told and retold,
 that people will never cease telling;
a source of wisdom
 in the sky, the earth, and the lower world;
a tale the twice-born know;
 a tale for the learned,
skilful in style, varied in metres,
 devoted to dialogue human and divine.

In the beginning the world was without light and surrounded by darkness. Then came the first stirring, a vast egg, the inexhaustible seed of life.

From the egg came Prajapati, lord of creatures; and others, Manu, Daksha and his seven sons; the twin Asvins, the Adityas, and the Pitris.

Then came the waters, the earth, the air, the sky, the points of the heavens; the years, the seasons, the months, the fortnights, day and night.

In this manner was born all that men know.

But all this, lifeless or animate, whatever is seen in the universe, will pass away when the yuga is over. And another yuga will bring new life, like new fruit after a dead season. So the world revolves, without beginning and without end, a wheel of creation and destruction.

After Vyasa had conceived his poem, he began to think of ways of teaching it to his followers. Brahma, aware of his concern, appeared before him. Vyasa was surprised, but stood with folded palms; he sat down when commanded by Brahma.

"My poem is finished in my mind, O Brahma," said Vyasa. "It tells of past, present, and future; of decay and death, fear and disease, what is and what is not. It describes the four castes, and prescribes rules for the ascetic. It gives the dimensions of the star and planets, sums up the Vedas, and explains the philosophies. Mountains, rivers, oceans, holy places and heavenly cities, different races and languages, the art of war and the anatomy of the divine—all are in it. But I cannot think of anyone to take it down exactly as I dictate it."

"You say your work is a poem," replied Brahma, "and a poem it will be, so great that no other poem shall rival it. And Ganesha will take it down." Saying which, he disappeared.

Vyasa mentally summoned Ganesha, the elephant-faced god, remover of obstacles and fulfiller of desires.

"Listen to me carefully," he said, "for you shall transcribe the poem of Bharata I have formed in my imagination."

"Agreed," replied Ganesha, "but on one condition. You must not pause in your dictation."

"Agreed," said Vyasa, "but on another condition. You must grasp whatever I say before you take it down."

Ganesha intoned *Om* and began to write. But the witty Vyasa packed his meaning tight, and the arrangement worked smoothly, for even the omniscient Ganesha had to pause often in order to catch his meaning. During the pauses, Vyasa went on composing.

Like collyrium opening the eyes, this poem opens knowledge to an enquiring world. Like the buds of the water lily opening to the soft moonlight, the mind opens to the *Mahabharata*. This poem is the darkness-dispelling lamp of history, which floods the house of nature with its light. It is a tree that bears unfading flowers and sweet fruit.

It tells the story of the greatness of the house of Kuru, the goodness of Gandhari, the wisdom of Vidura, the constancy of Kunti; it describes the divinity of Krishna, the honesty of the five Pandavas, and the misdeeds of the sons of Dhritarashtra.

Time creates and Time destroys,
Time is the fire and Time the extinguisher,
Time the god of good and bad.
Time cuts us down, and Time creates anew.
Time does not sleep when all things sleep,
Only Time stands straight when all things fall.
Is, was, and shall be are Time's children.
O Reason, be witness! be stable!

The study of the *Mahabharata* is an act of faith. A page read in faith washes away the reader's demerits. Like butter among curd, like a Brahmin among men, like nectar among drugs, like the sea among collections of water, and the cow among animals, is the poem of Vyasa among histories. Whoever knows this can be saved. For penance, study, pursuit of truth and wealth are all virtuous; it is abuse of them that makes them harmful.

Work! Let good men throw off sloth. Fix your heart on virtue. Virtue is man's only friend. Who is clever enough to keep wealth and women forever with him? Can they be carried to the afterlife? Only the poem of Vyasa brings virtue, for it is virtue and holiness itself, a record of Dharma, Artha, and Moksha, spoken by Vyasa of immeasurable wisdom, the story of whose birth I shall now narrate.

Desire rose in the holy sage Parashara, when in the course of his travels he saw the fish-odorous Satyavati plying a boat on the Yamuna. Stirred by her tapering thighs and bold beauty, he said, "Lovely lady, I beg of you: take my love."

"There are holy men watching us from both banks," replied Satyavati, "so how shall I please you?"

The sage immediately created a fog which settled on an island. Impressed, but fearful because helpless, she blushed.

"I am still a virgin," she said "subject to my father's orders. If you make love to me, what will happen to me? How can I return home? How will I pass my days? What will my father say? O help me. I am so confused."

Parashara smiled. "You shall remain a virgin though you grant my desire. There is no cause for fear."

A child was born to her the same day that Parashara embraced her on the island in the Yamuna, a son who on the instant of his birth decided to be an ascetic. He left Satyavati with the words: "When you need me, recall me in your mind, and I will appear before you."

He was Dvaipayana, or the "Island-Born," who, knowing that virtue slackened in every yuga, arranged the scriptures for the benefit of mankind and came to be known as Vyasa, or the "Compiler."

King Pratipa of the Kurus spent many years doing penance on the banks of the Ganga. One day Ganga, assuming the form of a radiant girl, rose from the waters and stood before him. She saw him deep in meditation, and sat down on his right thigh, which was handsome and strong like the sal tree. He stirred, and looked at her.

"What do you want?"

"I want you for my husband," she replied. "A woman who comes of her own will cannot be refused. The wise would never approve if she were."

"I am bound by a sacred vow. No lust stirs in me for others' wives or women not of my caste."

"Am I ugly?" she said. "Am I impure? Enjoy me. I can give you pleasure. There is divine blood in my veins. I want you for my husband. O do not refuse me."

"I have taken a vow," Pratipa repeated. "It will destroy me if I break it. You are lovely, I know, and you sat on my right thigh. The right is for daughters and daughters-in-law, the left for a wife. You did not sit on my left, and I will not break my vow. Be my daughter-in-law, if you wish. I accept you as wife for my son when he is born."

"Very well," she agreed. "Because I honour you and the race of the Bharatas, I will be your son's wife. The glories of your race are countless. But before I become your daughter-in-law, let your son know well that he must not question anything I do. I shall be good to him, I shall make him happy, and bear him many sons; but he must know that I am free to do what I like."

She vanished.

In their old age, and after many strict austerities, in Hastinapura a son was born to Pratipa and his wife. They called him Shantanu, a good son, given to dharma, convinced that good deeds alone take a man to heaven.

Shantanu grew up, intelligent, and refulgent like Indra. Much of his time he spent in hunting (a sport he loved), killing deer and buffalo. One day, while passing along the banks of the Ganga, he saw a girl of incredible beauty, with teeth like pearls, and shining ornaments on a body dressed in lotus-soft cloth. He drank her beauty in, trembling. She looked at him, and did not want to look away.

Softly he spoke to her. "Are you a goddess, an apsara, a yaksha or a naga? Are you human? Whatever you are, be my wife."

She smiled, for his words were sweet. "I will be your wife and live with you. But on one condition. Never say an unkind word to me. Never interfere with anything I do. As long as you are kind, I will be your wife. The day you speak a single harsh word, I shall leave you."

Shantanu agreed, and they lived happily together. She pleased him with her beauty, her subtle ways of making love, her singing and dancing. Months, seasons, and years came and went, and the king was not even aware of their passing.

Eight children were born to them, each god-like in beauty. One by one, as they arrived, she threw them in the Ganga, saying, "I do this for your good." Though horrified, Shantanu did not say a word. But when the eighth child was born and was about to be cast joyfully in the river, he spoke up:

"I will not allow it! Who are you? Why do you kill your own children? Don't you see what a horrible deed it is?"

His wife replied, "Since you order me to do so, this child I will spare. But you have broken your word—now I can not remain with you. I am Ganga, daughter of Jahnu. These eight sons are the eight Vasus, and no one on earth but I could have been their mother. A curse on them ordained that they would have to assume human forms. But you will be blessed, my husband, for being their father. Now I leave you, giving you this last child. Call him Gangadatta, the gift of the Ganga."

She disappeared, taking the child with her, and Shantanu returned to his capital in great sorrow. He continued to be a good ruler; speech and truth went hand in hand in his reign, the citizens were inspired by dharma and charity. After thirty-six years of dignified rule, Shantanu retired to the forest.

One day, chasing a deer wounded by one of his arrows, he noticed the waters of the Ganga running shallow in a certain spot. Puzzled, he sat down, asking himself why the holy river should behave in this way, when he suddenly saw a handsome youth pushing the river waters down with divine weapons. It was his son, but Shantanu, having seen him only for a few minutes after his birth, could not recognize him. But the boy recognized his father and, quickly obscuring Shantanu's vision with his divine powers, disappeared.

Shantanu addressed Ganga, saying, "Show me my son." And Ganga brought the boy, dressed richly, leading him by her right hand.

"Here he is," she said, "your eighth son. I have looked after him with great care. He knows the Vedas and the use of all weapons. He is a mighty bowman, like Indra himself in battle. And he knows all the duties of kingship as well." Shantanu took him to the capital and made him his heir-apparent.

Four years passed; and, wandering in the woods one day by the banks of the Yamuna, Shantanu was struck by a delicate fragrance that came upon him unawares. Looking around, he saw a black-eyed girl, a fisherman's daughter.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I am the chief fisherman's daughter," she replied. "I ferry passengers across the river, to collect religious merit for my father."

Her scented and smiling beauty stirred love in Shantanu. Going to her father, he asked for her hand in marriage.

"Marry she will, sire, because she is so lovely," said her father. "But one favour I have always wanted for her. Promise me, sire, that you will not refuse me, and I will gladly give her to you. I know I can find no better husband than you."

"I cannot promise until I know what I am promising," replied Shantanu. "What is the favour you seek? I make no promises in advance."

"Only this, sire," said the fisherman, "that her son, and no one else, shall be your heir."

Shantanu returned to Hastinapura with a heavy heart, spending his days in pensive and amorous aloneness. One day Gangadatta found him in that state and said, "All chiefs pay you tribute, father; prosperity attends you; why do you grieve?"

"A black sadness afflicts me, my son. I will tell you why. You are my only son; to me you are more than a hundred sons. But life is such an uncertain affair. . . . Don't misunderstand me: it is not that I wish to marry again. I know that you will live long and add lustre to our dynasty. But the saying is that he who has one son has no son. I also know that I shall attain heaven because I have been so fortunate in having you as my son. But you are a great warrior, you lose your head quickly, and you are always ready for battle. If I should lose you. . .if you should die, what will happen to our line?"

The intelligent Gangadatta guessed his father's meaning and soon discovered from the king's old minister the condition laid down by the chief of the fishermen. Attended by courtiers and chiefs, he went to the fisherman, and said:

"Listen to my vow, O fisherman. Never has there been, nor will there be again, such a vow! I vow that the son of your daughter shall be our king."

But the fisherman pressed his case, saying: "I know you are virtuous, and I know you will keep your vow. How can I doubt your word? But how can I be sure that your children too will keep your word? Forgive me this doubt, my lord: I speak as a father with a daughter whose welfare is closest to his heart."

"Then listen to me again, O Chief of fishermen! Earlier I surrendered my right to the throne. Now, before all these chiefs and courtiers, I give you my word never to marry. Heaven shall yet be mine, though I am sonless."

The fisherman horripilated in joy.

"I give my daughter to the king," he exclaimed.

And instantly the apsaras and gods and sages sent a rain of flowers from the sky on Gangadatta's head.

"He shall be known as Bhishma, the Terrible-Vowed," they proclaimed.

Bhishma approached the fisherman's daughter. "Mother," he said, "ascend my chariot. Let us go to the palace."

When Shantanu heard of Bhishma's vow, he was greatly pleased. "I give you a boon, my son," he told Bhishma. "So long as you wish to live, death will not be able to harm you. You will die only when you will to die."

Two sons were born to Satyavati and Shantanu—Chitrangada, a brave and clever boy, and Vichitravirya, a powerful bowman. When time took Shantanu away, Bhishma installed Chitrangada on the throne. The envious king of the Gandharvas, also named Chitrangada, challenged the son of Shantanu to battle. For three years they fought on the banks of the Sarasvati, but eventually the Gandharva tricked and killed Chitrangada. Bhishma performed all the funeral rites, and, with the advice of Satyavati, acted as regent for the prince Vichitravirya.

When the boy came of age, news reached Bhishma that the three beautiful daughters of the king of Varanasi were going to select husbands at a *svayamvara* ceremony. He hurried to Varanasi, and found the city packed with nobility and royalty. When the names of the various kings were being called out at the time of the selection, Bhishma gathered the three girls into his chariot, and called in a cloud-roaring voice:

"The wise have declared that a girl can be given finely dressed and with much dowry to a noble guest who is invited for that purpose. Others give a girl in exchange for cows. Some give money, some girls are abducted. Some consult the girl, some drug her into consent, and some secure the parents' approval. Some get girls as presents, to help at rituals and sacrifices. The learned approve of the last; a king prefers to be chosen by the girl herself; but the wise applaud a girl taken by force from an assembly of kings. I take these three girls by force! Stop me, if you dare! I throw you an open challenge."

He raced his chariot around the assembly. The kings rose, slapping their arm-pits like wrestlers, and biting their lower lips. Ornaments were cast off, and armour put on, both flashing like bright meteors in the sky. Brows furrowed and eyes flaming in anger, they lined up, shooting ten thousand arrows at Bhishma. But Bhishma raised a shower of his own arrows, as thick as the hair on his body. And as their arrow-cloud was about to fall on his mountain-breast, Bhishma pierced it, pinning down each king with two shafts; after which, he raced towards Hastinapura.

Hot in pursuit came the mighty chariot-warrior Shalva. Cornering Bhishma like a leader elephant ripping open the haunches of a rival with his tusks in the rutting season, he shouted, "Stop!"

The king stood as silent witnesses. The adversaries strutted like two snorting bulls lusting for a cow.

"Drive me to him," shouted Bhishma to his driver, "that I may kill him as Garuda kills a snake." With these words he shot down the four horses of Shalva's chariot and slew the charioteer, but let the humiliated Shalva escape unharmed. The others who had come to the *svayamvara* slowly dispersed.

Arriving triumphant in Hastinapura, Bhishma offered the three girls to Vichitravirya, treating them with the tenderness that he would reserve for his own womenfolk. Preparations were made for the wedding. But when every detail had been settled by Bhishma and Satyavati, the eldest girl, Amba, came to Bhishma and said:

"In my heart I chose the king of Saubha, and he, in his heart, chose me. My father approved, and in the assembly I would have garlanded him."

Bhishma respected her choice, and let her go. He married the two other sisters, Ambika and Ambalika, to Vichitravirya. Marriage brought out only the lustful in Vichitravirya, for Ambika and Ambalika were both tall, with skins the colour of burnt gold, with round, heavy breasts, and full hips. Seven years he passed in erotic delights and then, in the prime of his youth, consumption afflicted him. Friends and relatives clustered round, giving advice. But he died, like a swift-setting sun, plunging Bhishma in great anxiety and grief.

The sorrowing Satyavati, thinking of the future, turned to Bhishma. "Now everything is in your hands. My son—your brother—died childless. His wives are still young and beautiful, and capable of bearing children. Be a husband to one, Bhishma, for the sake of our house."

"You do not know what you say, mother. I have taken a vow not to marry, and I intend to keep it. I will give up heaven, the three worlds, everything, rather than break my vow. The sun will lose its glory, fire its heat, and Dharma his fairness before I stray from the path of truth."

"I know you love truth dearly," Satyavati pressed him. "But this case is different. You owe it to your ancestors. The family line must not be broken."

"To transgress truth is to invite ruin," replied Bhishma. "But there is a way. . . . You have heard of the sage Utathya and his wife Mamata. When Utathya's younger brother Vrihaspati lusted for her, she refused him for she was already pregnant with Utathya's seed. 'The child in my womb is learned and knows the Vedas,' she said. 'Your seed will go in vain. Leave me alone.' But still he lusted, and when he was about to enter her, the child in her womb addressed him: 'Cease, Uncle! There is not space here for two. Your seed will go in vain.' But Vrihaspati would not listen, and clasped tight the lovely-eyed Mamata. Just as his seed was about to spurt, the learned child put out its feet and blocked the entrance, with the result that the seed spilled on the ground. Terribly angered, Vrihaspati cursed the child with perpetual blindness. But, as you know, the boy grew up very wise, married the Brahmin girl Pradveshi, and had many children. They were unruly boys, however, and they reviled their father, as did, in course of time, Pradveshi. 'What sort of a husband are you?' she would say. 'You are blind, and I've had to shoulder the burden of looking after the children. And I have had enough. I no longer consider you my lord.' The sage, roused, cursed her, saying, 'From this day let a woman learn to be happy with one man only for all her life. Let Dharma forbid love with any man but her husband. If she love another, let shame afflict her; and if she have money, let misery hound her.' 'Throw him into the Ganga!' she shouted. For many days the blind sage drifted on the plank to which his sons had tied him, until a king named Vali saved him. 'O holy one,' said Vali, learning of the sage's identity, 'give me a few wise and noble sons from my wife Sudeshna.' But the queen, disliking his blindness, sent instead her low-caste nurse, who bore the sage eleven sons. Then Vali sent Sudeshna again, and merely by touching her the sage gave her five sons. That was how Vali's line was continued. It was not the first time Brahmin seed came to the help of Kshatriya kings. You know my meaning, mother: I leave the rest to you."

Satyavati smiled. "You are virtuous and truthful. You give me hope. When my son Vyasa left me, he promised to come whenever I needed him. Tell me, Bhishma, if I should mentally summon him now."

"Action for virtue's sake is wise action, so it is said. It will help us, it is virtuous—so I recommend it."

Vyasa was busy far away expounding the Vedas when Satyavati thought of him. Instantly he stood before his mother, visible to her alone. He placed cool water on her eyes, red with joyful crying on seeing him, and said, "Here I am, mother. Tell me what you want me to do."

"They say a mother has as much right over a son as a father. I do not know how you will like what I say, my son, but I am going to say it none the less. Vichitravirya died childless, and Bhishma has renounced sex. Give my two daughters-in-law children, so that our line may not perish."

"I wiil do as you say," answered Vyasa, "because you are virtuous and wise. My brother will have children as excellent as Yama and Varuna. I will give the two wives a one-year vow to keep. When they have been purified by the vow's observance, let them come to me."

"No," said Satyavati, "that would be too late. They must have sons quickly. A kingdom without a king decays, the holy rites are neglected, the rain clouds dry up, and the gods vanish."

"If they want children now," replied Vyasa, "teach them to suffer my ugliness for I shall appear to them in the hideous form of a flesh-mortifying ascetic. That is penance enough, I think. If Ambika wants a son, she must embrace me as I am—me and my smelling flesh, my fearful face, my tattered clothes. Tell her to wait for me in her bed cleanly dressed and adorned with ornaments."

With much persuasion Satyavati convinced Ambika that Bhishma had a plan for her consonant with the dictates of Dharma. When Ambika's season came, Satyavati bathed her and took her to the sleeping quarters, and laid her on a luxurious bed.

"Your husband had an elder brother whose seed will enter your womb tonight," she said. "Wait for him; do not go off to sleep."

Vyasa entered when the lamp was burning. Shocked by his frightful face, his matted coppery hair, his livid eyes and black beard, she closed her eyes. Though Vyasa lay with her and united with her, she did not once open her eyes.

When Vyasa came out of the room, his mother enquired, "Will she have a son?"

"Yes," he replied, "intelligent, brave, and active. And he shall have a hundred sons of his own. But because his mother did not look at me in the act of love, he will be born blind."

"How will a blind king rule?" asked Satyavati. "How will he bring glory to his race? Give us another king, my son."

Vyasa agreed. In the meantime Ambika gave birth to a blind son, Dhritarashtra.

When Vyasa approached the second wife of his brother, Ambalika paled with fear seeing him. "Since you pale because of me," he said, "your son will be born yellow-skinned, and will be known as Pandu, or the Pale One."

But Satyavati insisted that a third son be given, because she was not happy with a pale grandson either. And she asked Ambika, when her season came, to embrace Vyasa again. Ambika, remembering the horrible face and repugnant smell, sent a lovely maid instead, dressed in her own ornaments. The low-caste maid rose respectfully when Vyasa entered, and sat down by his side as instructed.

He said, "Sweet lady, you shall no more be a slave. And your son will be one of the wisest and noblest on earth." In this way was born Vidura, brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu; he was serene, he was learned in the art of government, he resembled the god Dharma himself.

Informing Satyavati of Ambika's deception and its results, Vyasa disappeared.

And the kingdom prospered after the birth of the children.
Harvests were good, the wheat sweet-scented,
Rains came in season, stirring fruit and flower,
Happy the cattle, bird and beasts,
Cities crowded with merchants, artisans and traders,
Citizens learned, and honest, and active,
Robbers unknown, and crime unknown—

A golden age, the fruit of the wheel of Dharma.

Bhishma brought up Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura as if they had been his own children. Pandu excelled in archery, Dhritarashtra in strength, and none in the three worlds equalled Vidura in virtuous wisdom. And because Dhritarashtra's blindness and Vidura's low-caste birth disqualified them, Pandu became king.

"I have brought you up," said Bhishma to the three young men, "in the hope that our line may prosper. I am now given news that three girls, pure-blooded and beautiful, have been found suitable for marriage into our family. One is the daughter of the Yadava king, another the daughter of Subala, and the third the princess of Madra. How do you feel about this?"

Vidura spoke up first. "You have been father as well as a mother to us. You are our guru; your word is law. Whatever you decide, we are honoured to obey."

When Bhishma learnt that Gandhari, the daughter of Subala, had obtained the favour of Shiva to have a hundred sons, he quickly sent emissaries to her father proposing her marriage with Dhritarashtra.

When Gandhari heard that Dhritarashtra was blind, she took a long multi-folded piece of cloth and, out of respect and love for her husband, bandaged her eyes with it. That bandage was never removed as long as she lived. Her brother Shakuni gave her away in marriage, and the lavish ceremonies were conducted under Bhishma's supervision.

The beauty of Kunti, adopted daughter of the Yadava king, rivalled the Earth's. When the irritable sage Durvasas granted her a boon for pleasing him with the sincerity of her youthful devotions, she used the mantra to summon the sun god, Surya.

"I am at your service, O black-eyed girl," said the flaming god. "Tell me your desire."

Trembling, she said, "I want no favour, my lord. I was only testing the mantra to see if it worked. Please forgive me."

"But I want a favour from you, Kunti. Give me leave to make love to you. Don't be afraid. Remember, to summon me for no purpose is not right."

He soothed her with many words, for she was timid and afraid. At first her modesty and fear of her family made her refuse him, but he persisted, saying, "I am the sun god, do not be afraid," until she yielded to his embraces.

From this union was born a son clad in natural armour and wearing two large earrings. The sun god Surya then left, restoring virginity to Kunti. Afraid and ashamed, she cast the child into a river. He was saved by a shepherdess Radha and her husband, the charioteer Adhiratha, and they named him Vasusena or Born-with-wealth, because of his natural armour and earrings.

The boy passed his days pleasing the Brahmins, sitting from morning to evening with his back exposed to absorb the energy of the sun. When Indra, the chief of the gods, eager to help his own son Arjuna, came disguised as a Brahimin and asked for armour, the boy without a word hacked his off and gave it to Indra. Pleased, Indra handed him a divine arrow, saying, "Take this arrow; it has power to kill one—but only one—of the gods, demons, humans, gandharvas or nagas, if you desire that being's death." This was the reason why Vasusena came to known as Karna, which means the Hacker-off.

Seeing that the large-eyed Kunti, though beautiful and accomplished in every feminine art, received no offers of marriage, her father Kunti-bhoja held a *svayamvara* to which were invited kings and princes from many countries. Kunti saw, in the assembly, the manly figure of Pandu, as broad-chested, as bull-eyed, as lion-brave, as Indra. She came toward him modestly, trembling with feeling, and placed the garland round his neck. Pandu returned to his palace with his large retinue, blessed by the voices of pandits pronouncing benedictions; and he and his queen Kunti reigned happily.

But Bhishma had set his mind on a second marriage for him, for which reason he set out with a vast army to the capital of Shalya, the king of Madra, where he was received with great hospitality. A white carpet was spread for him to sit on, and water brought to wash his feet.

"I come here on behalf of King Pandu to ask for the hand of your sister Madri," said Bhishma. "The fame of her beauty and virtue has reached us. It is, in my opinion, a good alliance, and I seek your consent."

"Your proposal appeals to me," replied Salya, "but you know the custom in our family. It is an old tradition and, for good or bad, I must follow it. I cannot give you any assurance about something that concerns the feelings of my sister."

"I am aware of the custom," replied Bhishma, "and I know that an observance honoured by tradition has the approval of wise and virtuous men." With these words, he placed before Shalya vast treasures of pure gold and minted gold, thousands of precious stones of all colours, elephants and horses and chariots, robes and ornaments, pearls and corals and other gems. Happy with the dowry, Shalya gave his sister to Bhishma, who returned rejoicing to Hastinapura.

After a month of sensual pleasures with his two wives, Pandu set out from his capital on a campaign for the conquest of the world, taking with him an enormous force of elephants, horses and chariots, blessed by the good wishes of Bhishma and the citizens. First to suffer defeat were the robber bands of Dasharna. Then Pandu killed the king of Magadha, the proud Dirgha, and looted his treasury. The kingdom of Mithila was crossed next and the Videhas subdued. Finally fell the cities of Varanasi, Sambha and Pundra. Nothing withstood the raging fire of his army, and all the kings of the earth, reduced to vassals, paid him tribute of gold and silver, cows, elephants, asses, camels and buffaloes, goats and sheep, expensive blankets and hides, and soft deerskin carpets. And the victorious Pandu, falling at Bhishma's feet, paid his respects.

Subsequently Bhishma, learning that king Devaka had a young and lovely daughter born of a low-caste wife, arranged her marriage with Vidura, and many excellent children were born of this union.

Dhritarashtra had a hundred sons by Gandhari, and another son by a Vaishya wife. Pandu's two wives, Kunti and Madri, gave him five sons, all born through divine intervention.

Because Gandhari had once sheltered Vyasa when he came to her collapsing from hunger and weariness, she was given by Shiva the boon of bearing a hundred sons. For two years she carried the seed in her womb, bewildered by the delay in her delivery. When news reached her that Kunti (as recounted a little later) had given birth, while in exile with her husband Pandu, to a refulgent son, her grief burst out and, without telling her husband, she struck at her womb with terrifying strength. Out of her womb fell a hard fleshy mass of two years' growth, resembling an iron ball. She was going to pick it up and throw it away when Vyasa appeared and said:

"What have you done?"

"When I heard of Kunti's baby, glorious like the sun himself," she confessed, "I could not control myself and I struck my womb. You told me I would have a hundred sons. Is this ball of flesh a hundred sons?"

"Even when I joke," said Vyasa, "I mean what I say. Have I ever failed anyone? Quickly prepare a hundred pots of ghee, and hide them. And drench this ball of flesh with cool water."

When sprinkled with water, the ball of flesh splintered into a hundred and one equal thumb-size fragments. These were placed in the hidden pots of ghee, and a close watch kept. Instructing Gandhari to open their lids after two years, Vyasa left for the Himalayas to continue his yoga.

Out of one pot was born Duryodhana. Duryodhana was born first, and Yudhishthira was conceived first. And Duryodhana brayed like an ass at the time of his birth; and asses all over the kingdom brayed, and jackals howled, and vultures shrieked, and crows cawed. And there was a blowing of tumultuous winds, and a breaking out of fires.

Noticing these fearful omens, the wise Vidura advised Dhritarashtra, "Your eldest son will bring destruction on us, sire. Cast him off! For the sake of the world's good, and for our sake, cast him off! It is said that for the sake of the family one person may be sacrificed, for the sake of a village one family may be sacrificed, for the sake of the country a village may be sacrificed, and a country sacrificed for the sake of the soul."

But Dhritarashtra loved his son and would not follow Vidura's advice.

Within a month all the hundred sons were born, and a daughter called Dushala. The same year the Vaishya maid who used to attend on Dhritarashtra when Gandhari was in an advanced state of pregnancy gave birth to a son named Yuyutsu. At the proper time and with proper ceremony Dushala was married to Jayadratha, king of the Sindhus.

One day Pandu was roaming in the Himalayan woods when, seeing a large deer coupling with his mate, he wounded the male with five of his sharpest and swiftest golden arrows. As the beast fell, pierced fatally, weird cries issued from its mouth.

"Even lustful men leave coupling beasts alone," he moaned. "Even in battle unprepared enemies are spared by soldiers. The act of love is sweet and fruitful. What possessed you to kill me when I was mating? It is cruel, it is wrong, it is most heinous and condemnable! What harm did I do you, O king? Here I was, living in peace. . . then suddenly shot by you. Yet, before I die, I curse you!

"My name is Kimindama. I am a Brahmin's son and, disguised as a deer, I enjoyed pleasures in the forest I could not get in the city. Since you did not know me to be a Brahmin, the defilement of killing a twice-born will not be yours. But let my fate be yours! When you mate with your wife, as I mated with the deer, then shall your spirit leave your body. Then shall your wife also follow you to the world of the dead. You brought me sorrow when I was happy; so sorrow will grip you in your moment of happiness."

Great grief overtook Pandu after the death of the deer-Brahmin, and he thought to himself, "Addiction to lust killed my mother's husband, though the virtuous Shantanu gave him birth. And though truth-speaking Vyasa is my father, lust consumes me too. My malice leads me to hunt deer in the woods. Oh, I must become good again and seek moksha. Having children and other worldly desires stands in the way of moksha—I must give them up! Let me practise continence. Let me curb my passions by severe yoga.

"Head shaven, a wanderer of the earth,
Begging from the trees for my food,
Dust on my body, and
Trees and ruined houses my only shelter;
Neither sorrow nor joy touching me,
Never shall I be a hypocrite again,
Never lose my temper, never mock another,
Passing the rest of my life
Cheerful and fearless, steadfast in kindness,
Embraced in the freedom of love.

Even worms I shall treat as my children."

When Kunti and Madri were informed of their husband's decision to renounce the world, they said, "If you leave us, life will leave us. Let us follow you, and like you engage in the practice of austerity."

"If you think that is right," Pandu replied, "let us leave now. No more the luxuries of city life; only exposure to heat and cold, performance of the *homa*, and meals of raw fruit and ripe fruit. And always, till the time of death, the search for stricter penances to practise."

He then called Brahmins and made over to them the giant jewel in his crown, his necklace, bracelets, earrings, robes, and all the ornaments of his wives. To his attendants he said, "Go to Hastinapura and tell the citizens that King Pandu and his wives have renounced wealth, desire, joy, and physical passion." Wailing loudly *We are lost*! they went to the capital, taking with them the remainder of the royal wealth to be distributed in charity. When Dhritarashtra heard the news, he wept for his brother, and found little delight in cozy beds and comfortable chairs and good food.

One day in the forest, Pandu, recalling his sterility, which was the consequence of the curse, said to Kunti, "Try to have sons, Kunti. Neither sacrifices, nor gifts nor well-kept vows bring merit to a sonless man such as I. The scriptures say there are six kinds of sons who become heirs: the son from a lawful wife, the son born to one's wife from a good man acting out of kindness, the son born to one's wife from a man paid for the purpose, the son born after a husband's death, the son born to a virgin, and the son of an unchaste wife: There are six related by blood but not heirs: the son given, the son bought and adopted, the self-given son, the son who comes with a pregnant bride, the son of a brother, and the son of a low-caste wife. In times of distress, younger brothers have been known to come to the rescue of sonless elder brothers. And even Manu says that husbands without offspring should obtain the services of others for their wives, because sons bring the highest merit I command you, Kunti, to give me sons from someone either equal or superior to me. You know such an act was done by the daughter of Saradandayana at the order of her husband.

Do likewise for me."

"I am your lawful wife, my lord," replied Kunti. "But, O my lotus-eyed husband, do not expect this of me. I am faithful to you. I know you can give me children. Embrace me, my lord, and give me your love. For even in thought shall no other man embrace me. Such is my vow. Who is there nobler than you?"

"What you say is virtuous, my wife," remarked Pandu, "but you must surely know that even the moral sages speak of a time in the past when women were free, neither confined to their homes nor dependent on their husbands. Nor was fidelity valued in those days; yet the charge of immorality is never brought against them. Even today the northern Kurus follow such practices. One husband married to one wife is a recent custom. Let me tell you how it came about and why.

"You have heard of the sage Uddalaka. His son Shvetaketu established the institution of marriage One day, in his father's presence, a Brahmin caught hold of his mother's hand, saying, 'Come with me.' Shvetaketu was furious and, though Uddalaka pacified him, he decided to introduce the custom of marriage as we know it now, defying the tradition in doing so. And you know how Madayanti, having her husband's good in mind, conceived her son Ashmaka by consorting with the sage Vasishtha.

"You also know the story of our own family, how Vyasa fathered us. Listen to me: what I say does not violate the Dharma. Don't the moralists declare that a wife, when her season comes, must sleep with her husband, but is free to do as she pleases at other times? Don't those who know the Vedas declare that a good wife is bound to obey whatever her husband tells her to do? Listen to me, my sweet wife—look, I join my hands and cup them like lotus leaves, and place them on my head, and I implore you! Choose a noble Brahmin to give you children."

The attentive and dutiful Kunti said, "When I was a girl, my lord, my devotions pleased the sage Durvasas, and he granted me a mantra which he said would summon any god I desire if I ever wanted children. If you think it proper, my lord, tell me which god I should call."

"We are fortunate," said Pandu. "Summon Dharma, the god of justice, the best of the celestials."

All this took place when Gandhari's conception was just a year advanced. When Dharma appeared before Kunti in his refulgent chariot, asking "What do you want, Kunti?", she replied, "Give me a son."

An excellent son was born, in the month of October, of the union of Kunti and the god of justice. At the time of his birth a voice from the sky proclaimed: "Most truthful and virtuous among men shall be this boy, whose name is Yudhishthira, whose glory shall reverberate in the three worlds."

After Yudhishthira's birth, Pandu turned again to Kunti. "What we need now is a Kshatriya boy. Ask this time for a son of invincible strength." Kunti invoked Vayu, and the god of wind, riding a deer, stood before her. And so was born, on the same day as Duryodhana, the powerful and fierce Bhima, about whom the voice in the skies proclaimed: "None in the world shall be stronger than he." One day as Kunti suddenly stood up, startled by a tiger, the sleeping baby fell from her lap on a stone, which shivered into dust at the impact.

After Bhima's birth, Pandu began assiduously pleasing Indra by such austerities as standing on one leg from morning till evening, and he instructed Kunti to observe a special vow for one year. Finally Indra appeared and said, "The son I will give you will destroy the wicked and delight the virtuous."

The child born was Arjuna, proclaimed by the voice in the sky to be equal to Shiva in prowess; he was the loved one of Vishnu, he was the invincible wielder of celestial weapons. Kunti heard these words in the birth-room. The sages heard them on the hundred-peaked mountain, and the gods as they sat in their chariots. And they all rejoiced.

When Pandu wanted Kunti to have another son, she refused. "The wise have spoken against a fourth son. A woman who has intercourse with four men is defiled, and one who has intercourse with five is a prostitute. Why, my lord, do you forget the saying of the scriptures on this subject?"

After the birth of Kunti's sons and Dhritarashtra's hundred sons, Madri approached her husband:

"If you think ill of me, my lord, I do not mind. I do not mind if Kunti, born inferior, is held superior to me in your estimation. I do not mind if Gandhari has a hundred sons. But I do mind if you have sons from Kunti alone, and leave me out. She is my rival, and I will not go to her asking for a favour. If, however, you speak to her, she may consent to help me."

Pandu went to Kunti. "Grant me more children. Kunti. Help Madri to become a mother."

Kunti asked Madri to think of a god, and Madri immediately called to mind the twin Ashvins. The two handsome sons born to her were named Nakula and Sahadeva. But when Pandu approached Kunti a second time on Madri's behalf, she said:

"She has two sons already. She tricked me. At this rate she will have more than I. This is the way of crafty women. How was I to know she would invoke twin gods? Do not ask me again, my lord. My mantra shall remain with me."

Like lotuses on a lake, the five children quickly grew up, and Pandu's ebbing energies revived. Once, in spring, he roamed in the woods with Madri, admiring the new flowers on the trees.

All around were champak, mango and ashoka
Surrounded by swarms of intoxicated bees,
From under the branches the song of the kokila
Kept tune with black bees' humming,
All trees bent with fruit and flower,
All pools were lovely with fragrant lotus.

Soft desire stirred in Pandu when he looked at lotus-eyed Madri in her transparent dress, desire that soon burst into flame. He pulled her towards him; she trembled, and resisted as much as she could. Propelled by fate and forgetful of the curse, seduced by the sweetness of his senses, he forced his will on her and died in the act of love.

She clasped his lifeless body and began wailing. Hearing the sounds of lamentation, Kunti and her sons hurried to her side, but she cried, "Keep the boys at a distance, Kunti! Come here alone." And Kunti wept loudly when she saw Pandu and Madri prostrate on the ground.

"O why did you tempt him, Madri? How I used to care for him! He was always sad when he was with me, always thinking of the curse. You are fortunate, I envy you. He was merry with you."

"O my sister, I fought him with all my might, but he would not listen."

"I am the elder wife," Kunti said. "Do not stop me from doing what must now be done. Get up, Madri, and give me his body. I must follow him to the world of the dead. You will stay and bring up the children."

"No," replied Madri. "Look, I still embrace him. My desire has not been satisfied. Let me go with him. Let me fulfil his ungratified love in the world of the dead. I know I will not be able to look after your children well. Let me instead leave mine in your care. My body must burn with his. It is my only wish."

She ascended the funeral pyre of her lord. Vidura, in consultation with Bhishma, had selected the sacred spot for the last rites. The family priests fed the holy fire with fragrant ghee. Friends, relatives and followers wrapped Pandu's body in white cloth over which waved yaktails below a white umbrella, and carried it to the pyre. When they came to a green wood on the banks of the Ganga, they laid the body on the ground, washed it with water brought in golden vessels, and smeared it with scented paste. He seemed to be sleeping on a decorated bed.

Then they lit the pyre.

When all was consumed, the Pandavas vowed to sleep on the bare ground in penance, and the Brahmins and citizens did likewise. Twelve days of mourning were observed in the kingdom.

Many years after the *sraddha* ceremony Vyasa said to his mother Satyavati, "The days of glory are over, the days of calamity have began. Everywhere I see crime, deceit and oppression in the kingdom. Vice flourishes, the world is decaying. You had better go to the forest, and spend your days in yoga. It is not good for old age to be witness to the collapse of a race."

Having asked and received the permission of Bhishma and accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, Satyavati retired to the forest where, after a period of fruitful meditation, she died.

In the meantime the sons of Pandu were growing up in the palace; they excelled the sons of Dhritarashtra in every way. Bhima was champion at running, at archery, at eating, and in scattering dust in the eyes of adversaries. He pulled their legs, and set one against another, laughing as he did so. He would drag them by the hair, fling them on the ground, and duck their heads in water until they nearly suffocated. When they climbed a tree to pick fruit, he shook both fruit and boys down. It was all done in fun; there was never malice in his mischief.

But Duryodhana grew to hate him; and planned a wicked revenge. "None of us is as strong as he," he reflected. "I'll have to trick him. When he is asleep in the garden, I'll throw him into the waters of the Ganga. Then I'll have Yudhishthira and Arjuna arrested, and I'll become king."

With this malignity in mind, Duryodhana had a palace constructed at a lovely spot called Pharmanakoti on the banks of the Ganga, filling it with all kinds of delights and delicacies. He called it "The Palace of Water Sports." Bright flags waved above it; delicious food was prepared by expert cooks.

"I invite you to the Palace of Water Sports," said Duryodhana to the Pandavas when the palace was completed.

Dismissing their retinue, the Pandavas entered, like lions going into a mountain cave. The graceful windows, the plastered walls, painted ceilings and fountains pleased them. In the courtyards were pools in which floated clusters of lotuses; the scent of flowers filled the air.

While they gave themselves up to enjoyment, Duryodhana mixed a strong poison in the food meant for Bhima. Nectar-voiced but razor-hearted, he personally served Bhima, and rejoiced at the success of his plot.

When Bhima emerged from the swimming pool, he complained of tiredness (the poison had begun to work) and lay down to rest. The cool breeze spread the poison to every part of his body, and he lost consciousness. Duryodhana tied him with ropes made of creepers, and threw him into the river; there Bhima sank and was carried away till he reached the undersea kingdom of the naga snakes. Thousands of venomous naga fangs bit viciously into his flesh, and the vegetable poison was neutralized by the snake poison. He was bitten all over except on his breast, whose tough skin the nagas' fangs could not pierce.

As he revived, Bhima began to attack the snakes and some of them, going to their king, Vasuki, said, "A man is attacking us. Help us." One of the snakes, Aryaka, the grandfather of Kunti's father, recognized Bhima, and reported the story to the snake king, who said, "How shall we placate him? We had better give him money and jewels."

"Wealth, sire," said Aryaka, "is not what he wants. Allow him to drink of our nectar cups so that his strength becomes invincible. In each cup is the strength of a thousand elephants. Let him drink all he can."

Purifying himself, Bhima emerged, sat facing the east, and drank, in one gulp, a whole cup of snake nectar, followed by seven more. Then the snakes prepared a bed for him, and he slept.

On his return to the palace, he narrated the treachery of Duryodhana and his adventures in the snake kingdom to his brothers, Yudhishthira advised him to keep everything to himself. "Let no one know. And from now on let us be on our guard."

On another occasion it was Yuyutsu, always friendly to the Pandavas, who informed Bhima that Duryodhana had mixed a deadly poison in his food. When that plan failed, Duryodhana, Karna, and Sakuni attempted other plots, but always in vain. Yet the Pandavas kept silent, for that was the advice given to them by Vidura.

In the meantime Dhritarashtra, worried by the increasing laziness and delinquency of his sons, engaged Kripa, a sage deeply learned in the Vedas, as their guru. And Bhishma too kept an eye open for a teacher skilled in military science and dedicated to the profession of arms. He found one in Drona, father of Ashvatthaman, the Horse-Voiced, whose quarrel with the arrogant king Drupada had made him seek refuge in Hastinapura, where he stayed in Kripa's house.

One day, Drona saw the Pandava princes playing with a ball which accidentally fell into a well. They tried hard to recover it, but failed, and looked around embarrassed. They gathered round Drona, who was a Brahmin. Drona smiled condescendingly at them. "Kshatriyas, all of you! And you cannot recover even a ball! I'll make a bet with you. I will take these blades of grass, and if I can bring out not only the ball but this ring also"—he took off his ring and threw it in the well—"you owe me a dinner tonight."

"A dinner is nothing, O Brahmin," answered Yudhishthira. "Ask for something that will last a lifetime."

"Look," said Drona, "at these magical stalks of reedy grass. One of them will pierce the ball, another the first stalk, a third the second, until a chain of stalks pulls up the ball."

They stood amazed as Drona skilfully carried out his boast, pulling the ball out of the well with a chain of stalks. "And the ring?" they asked.

He pulled the ring up also, handing it casually to the wondering princes.

Bhishma, greatly impressed, decided then to make Drona their tutor.

"My skill in weapons I learnt from a rishi," explained Drona, "with whom I passed many years as a brahmachari. Drupada was also his pupil and a good friend of mine, a very good friend for many years. He would even promise me his kingdom in those days. I would often recall his words after he had finished his studies and gone away.

"Well, I married after that, and was blessed with a son—Ashavtthaman. One day Ashvatthaman, seeing rich men's children drinking milk, wanted some himself. I went from place to place looking for someone who could afford to give away a cow, but I failed to get one. When I returned, I found that some of his friends had given Ashvatthaman water mixed with rice pulp and he was dancing in joy thinking he had tasted milk. I was touched, sire, and I was hurt that people should think I had no money to buy milk for my son. I resolved never to be anyone's servant, and went with my wife and son to my dear old friend Drupada, now crowned king. But he only laughed at me—he mocked me, sire, making fun of my 'impure birth,' as he called it. He told me one made friends only for a purpose, that poor and rich could not be friends, nor fools and pandits, nor cowards and heroes. 'I recall making no promises to you,' he said. 'If you like,' he said, 'you can shelter here for the night, I'll send you dinner.' Instead, I left and came here. I will be your guru. The favour I will ask in return for teaching you is simple: promise me in advance you will accomplish it."

The others remained silent, but Arjuna gave an unconditional promise. Drona embraced him, and proceeded to teach him the use of all divine and human weapons, making him the swiftest and cleverest of them all.

While instructing the Pandavas and his own son, Ashvatthaman, Drona would, from time to time, send the boys off to fetch water. The five Pandavas would each be given a pot with a narrow neck; Ashvatthaman a wide-mouthed one which he could fill quickly and return to his father much ahead of the rest. While they were away, Drona would teach his son extra and superior skills. But Arjuna soon discovered this ruse, and found a way filling his pot quickly. He now made the return trip in the same time as Ashvatthaman did, with the result that his training was in no way inferior.

Drona called the cook one day and said, "See that Arjuna is never served his meals in the dark." But once, as Arjuna was eating, a strong wind snuffed out the lamp, and forced him to eat mechanically in the dark. This gave him the idea of practising archery in the dark, and he became so proficient in the art of shooting straight even in pitch darkness that Drona clasped him in his arms, saying, "I give you my word that there shall be none in the world to equal you as a bowman." So pleased was Drona that he went on to teach Arjuna to fight on horseback as well as on foot, on an elephant or from a chariot, to fight with mace, spear, sword and dart.

Once, with Drona's permission, the princes set off on a hunting expedition, followed by a servant and a dog. The dog strayed to a part of the forest where Ekalavya, prince of the Nishadas, was roaming, and, at the sight of his dark skin, dust-smeared body, and black dress, began barking loudly. Ekalavya quickly shot seven arrows into its mouth; and the dog found its way back to the Pandavas, all seven arrows embedded in its mouth.

Struck with wonder at this feat, they asked Ekalavya, "Who are you?

"I am Ekalavya, prince of the Nishadas," he replied, "a pupil of Drona."

When Arjuna return to the city, he complained to Drona, "You promised me I would be the finest archer in the world. But what about Ekalavya?"

Drona then led Arjuna back to the forest where Ekalavya was practising archery. Seeing them approaching, Ekalavya came forward, touched Drona's feet, and prostrated himself on the ground.

"You have not paid my fee," said Drona.

"Command me, sir. There is no dakshina in the world that I will not give to my revered teacher."

"Give me the thumb of your right hand," said Drona.

Without a moment's hesitation and quite cheerfully Ekalavya sliced off his thumb and handed it to Drona. But when he began shooting arrows again, he was no longer so dexterous. And Arjuna's jealousy was calmed.

When the period of instruction was finished, Drona put the boys to a test. Planting a wooden vulture on a treetop, he said, "You have each one turn. Take aim well; stand with arrows fixed. When I give the signal, shoot at the bird's head."

Then he turned to Yudhishthira: "You first." Yudhishthira lifted his bow and took aim.

"Do you see the bird?"

"Yes."

"Look again. Do you see the bird?"

"I see the tree, the bird, I see you, and my brothers."

Drona repeated the question, and received the same reply.

"Stand aside," Drona said, irritated. "Your turn is over."

The same question was put in turn to each of the others, including all the sons of Dhritarashtra, and the same reply received in each case. Dismissed by Drona, they stood aside.

When Arjuna's turn came, Drona smiled. "Do not disappoint me. Look straight at the bird. When I give the signal, shoot."

Arjuna stretched the bowstring and waited.

"Do you see the bird, or the tree, or myself?"

"I see the bird. I see no tree. I do not see you."

Drona was pleased, "Describe the bird."

"I see no bird," answered Arjuna, "I see only the head of a vulture."

"Shoot!"

The vulture's head snapped and fell to the ground.

Drona embraced Arjuna; and in his heart he took this as a portent of the humbling of King Drupada.

Then he went to Dhritarashtra. "The education of your sons is complete, Sire. Allow them to display the skills they have learned."

"Name the time and place, noble Brahmin," said Dhritarashtra, "and the show of skill will be held. Vidura will make the necessary arrangements. I am blind and so envious of those who were fortunate to witness the skill of my sons."

A large treeless stretch of land was selected and an artistic platform constructed; on it were placed racks with all kinds of weapons. Next to it was a covered stand for the ladies, while wealthy citizens constructed their own platforms and pitched their own spacious tents.

On the day of the Test of Skill, King Dhritarashtra and his ministers, led by Bhishma and Kripa, came in procession to the stage of pure gold, inlaid with strings of pearls and lapis lazuli. The townfolk thronged in excitement at the spot. There was a blowing of many trumpets and beating of many drums, a noise of many voices; like an ocean in unrest.

Drona came last of all accompanied by his son Ashvatthaman. He was all in white—white sacred thread, white beard, white garlands and white sandal paste on his body—like the moon accompanied by the planet Mars, both seen in the clear sky. Brahmins chanted mantras and, after a fanfare, the heroes entered the arena. The spectators marvelled at their litheness, their strength and symmetry.

Ordering the musicians to stop playing, Drona came forward, and spoke in a cloud-roaring voice:

"Now comes Arjuna, beloved as my own son."

Arjuna then appeared, wearing golden armour, with his finger-protector, bow, and arrows. He was like an evening cloud that reflects the setting sun and catches rainbow tints and lightning-flash.

Conches sounded, and the crowd was delighted. "The graceful son of Kunti!" "The third Pandava brother!" "The saviour of the Kurus!" "The guardian of virtue and the repository of knowledge!" So great was Kunti's happiness that tears from her eyes, mixing with the milk of her breasts, wet her bosom.

Then Arjuna began displaying his skill. His fire weapon produced instant fire, his Varuna weapon produced water. Clouds, land, air, and mountains seemed to be created by different weapons; and with magical power, all were then obliterated by the weapon known as the *antardhana*. At one moment Arjuna appeared tall, at the next puny; now he was standing in a chariot, now crouching behind its wheel-shield, then lying on the ground. Shooting only once, he discharged five arrows into the jaws of a moving iron boar and sent twenty into the hollow of a cow horn oscillating from a rope. He circled the arena many times, displaying his prowess with sword and bow and mace.

Next came large-eyed Karna, palm-tree tall, the hero with natural skin-armour and shining earrings, who strode in like a walking cliff. Casually he bowed to Drona and Kripa. He performed the same feats with equal brilliance, while Arjuna watched in growing chagrin and anger. Duryodhana embraced Karna warmly: "Welcome to our side, noble warrior! Command us and rule our kingdom, if you like."

"Your offer is command and rule enough for me," replied Karna. "I have come here to challenge Arjuna."

Then the disgraced Arjuna said to cliff-straight Karna: "The fate of the unwelcome guest and the boaster will be yours, Karna. I shall kill you today."

"You boast too much, Arjuna. This arena doesn't belong to you—you forget there are other Kshatriya kings here, some better than you. Words are not the weapons a Kshatriya uses. Let us talk with arrows."

After embracing his brothers, Arjuna advanced for the combat. The sky was instantly darkened and Indra's rainbow straddled the arena; the clouds seemed to show their teeth in the rows of white cranes at their edges.

Kunti, mother of both Karna and Arjuna, fainted; she was revived by Vidura and her maids with sandal paste and water. When she looked again at her sons clad in hostile armour, helpless fear seized her.

Kripa, learned in the rules of combat, addressed Karna: "You face the youngest son of Kunti, Arjuna, of the house of Kuru. What is your royal lineage? Who are your father and mother? This Arjuna must know before he engages you, for sons of kings fight only with adversaries of equal status."

Karna's face paled, like a lotus wilted by pelting monsoon rain.

Then Duryodhana spoke. "Is it not true, revered Kripa, that the scriptures say there are three kinds of people who can lay claim to royalty—those with royal blood, heroes, and leaders of armies? If Arjuna will fight only with a king, very well—as of now I make Karna King of Anga."

Fried paddy, flowers and water pots were immediately brought; Karna was placed in a golden chair, and Brahmins recited mantras for his coronation; Karna turned to Duryodhana: "What may I give you in exchange for the kingdom?"

"Your friendship," replied Duryodhana.

Perspiring and trembling, the aged charioteer Adhiratha entered the arena. Karna dropped his bow and hurried to him, his forehead still wet with coronation water, and embraced him. Then before the assembly Adhiratha addressed Karna as his son.

"A charioteer's son!" mocked Bhima. "Let us hope you die nobly today. King of the Angas! You deserve a kingdom as much as a dog deserves the holy ghee of a *yajna*!" Karna's lips quivered: he sighed deeply and looked at the sun.

But Duryodhana rose up angrily. "You foul your mouth with those words, Bhima. A Kshatriya deserves more respect. Which Kshatriya hero's lineage is clean? Drona was born in a water pot, and Kripa in a bush. What has nobility of lineage to do with a fair fight? I know the story of your own birth. Do you think a tiger like Karna could be born of a deer? If there is anyone here displeased by my patronage of Karna, let him mount his chariot and bend his bow with the help of his feet."

Confused cries among the crowd applauded Duryodhana's speech. The sun, meanwhile, had set, and Duryodhana led Karna out of the now lamp-lit arena. The Pandavas also retired; the crowd dispersed, some praising Arjuna, some Karna, some even speaking for Duryodhana.

Kunti was happy. So was Duryodhana, in finding an ally whose prowess matched Arjuna's.

About this time it occurred to Drona to ask for his guru's fee.

"Capture King Drupada and bring him to me," he said to the princes. "That is all I want."

"It shall be done," they promised. They set off at once to lay siege to Drupada's capital. Duryodhana, Karna, and Yuyutsu were the first to enter the city in chariots, followed by other princes on horseback.

Drupada's chariot sped through their ranks, showering arrows, and the citizens rained all manner of fierce deadly missiles at them. The Kauravas broke ranks and fled in terror to the Pandava camp. Arjuna, instructing Nakula and Sahadeva to guard his right and left wheels, rushed into battle along with the mace-armed

Bhima. Struck by the mace, the enemy elephants collapsed like shattered cliffs, their heads crushed, streaming blood. Shouting, Arjuna leaped from his chariot into Drupada's, and bravely grappled with the king, like Garuda with the snake in the churning ocean.

Seeing the enemy soldiers flee, Arjuna told his men, "Draupada is related to the Kurus. Let his soldiers escape."

When the humbled Drupada was brought before him, Drona said, "We have laid waste your kingdom and capital. Your life now depends on my word. But do not fear. We Brahmins like to forgive." He smiled slowly. "We were friends once, Drupada. Can we not be friends again? You may keep the southern half of your kingdom. But I shall take the northern half, to make myself rich, because, remember, you told me once that rich and poor make bad company. What do you say, King Drupada?"

"Your strength and nobility are well known," replied Drupada. "I am not surprised. Let us be friends again."

Drupada was released and he went away sadly to rule in his new capital, Kampilya, on the banks of the Ganga. Aware now that he would never be able to defeat Drona by his own powers, he resolved to search for a son who would do the task for him.

A year later, compelled by his subjects, Dhritarashtra proclaimed as the heir-apparent Yudhishthira, whose firmness, patience, kindness, love, and truth-telling were admired by the people of his kingdom. In a short time, Yudhishthira began to excel even his father in affairs of state.

Disturbed by news of the increasing glory of Pandu's sons, Dhritarashtra summoned his chief minister Kanika. "I don't like the way they shine," he said. "O best of Brahmins, advise me what to do."

"Do not be angry with what I say, Sire. A king rules in many ways. Most important is that he hide his weakness, like a tortoise its head. A bit of pretended deafness and blindness helps, for it is no use a king's giving orders when they can't be executed. And if you can, kill your enemies—mercilessly if necessary; son, friend, brother, father, a guru if you must. When angry, smile. Speak softly. Then strike—and strike to kill. Then shed pitiful tears over your victim, perform whatever polite grieving is required.

"Amass all the wealth you can; any means will do. A crooked stick serves as well as a straight to pull down a tree's fruit.

"Never trust an enemy. Have spies everywhere; in temples, wine shops, public gardens, in the harem, wherever people gather.

"Be like a fisherman: prosper by catching and stripping clean your enemies.

"Speak softly—but keep a razor in your heart. Hide your feelings in a leather case; be as ruthless as a razor.

"In whatever you do now, think also of the future. My meaning is plain, Sire: act in a way that will remove your fear of the Pandavas."

Kanika returned to his house, leaving Dhritarashtra pensive and despondent.

Shakuni, Duhshasana, Duryodhana and Karna put their heads together and devised a plan to burn to death Kunti and her five sons, for which they went to seek Dhritarashtra's permission. But the wise Vidura got wind of the plot, and advised Kunti and her sons to leave the capital.

"Dhritarashtra will destroy the whole family," Vidura said to Kunti. "Leave this city before that happens. A boat is waiting to take you to safety." Deeply grieved, Kunti and her sons crossed the Ganga, took refuge in the deep forests on the other side, eventually finding their way to in the lovely city of Varanavata.

Duryodhana summoned his adviser Purochana, pressed his right hand in his, and said, "You know I trust you more than anyone else. Share the world's wealth with me! The Pandavas are now at Varanavata, thinking they are safe and enjoying themselves. Hurry there today in a swift chariot. Have a lacquer palace built; use plenty of hemp resin. Saturate the wood with a mixture of oil, fat, butter, and lac, but mostly lac. Let none suspect it is a firetrap. Then go to Kunti and her sons and invite them to stay in it. See that the house has every amenity. When they are sleeping inside, set fire to the entrance room. Spread the story that the Pandavas perished in an accidental fire."

But the wise Vidura, speaking to Yudhishthira in the little-known dialect of the Mlecchas, whispered, "Harm comes in many forms. Some use knives, others fire. Be warned, jackals burrow holes and escape. Be resolute. The stars give good guidance. Travel brings much knowledge."

"Thank you," said Yudhishthira, "I understand."

Purochana had the house built as directed and the Pandavas moved into it. He brought them food and drink, beds and carpets; for ten days the Pandavas lived luxuriously in the "Blessed House," as the treacherous palace was called. But Yudhishthira noticed that the walls smelled faintly of lac.

"Let us go back to our first house," said Arjuna.

"No. Act as if we suspect nothing. If Purochana thinks we have discovered his plot, he'll only act faster. Duryodhana is resourceful. Let him imagine we have actually perished in the fire; that will give us time to prepare for future treachery. We'll dig our way out tonight."

A friend of Vidura, a digger of tunnels, came to the Pandavas that day, saying, "I am sent by Vidura, who warned you in the dialect of the Mlecchas. I have come to help you. Purochana will strike on the fourteenth night."

A spacious tunnel was secretly dug, its opening covered with shrubbery, and a twenty-four hour vigil kept, while the Pandavas "innocently" went hunting every day in the forest.

Calling Arjuna, Bhima and the twins to his side on the thirteenth day, Yudhishthira said, "Purochana doesn't suspect a thing. It is time for our escape. We will set fire to the house when we leave and let him burn."

That night a large group of itinerant Brahmins came to the lacquer palace, along with many women; they ate and drank their fill, and went their way. But a Nishada tribal woman, with her five sons, stayed for the night; they drowsed with the liquor, more dead than alive, pawns of fate. A strong wind was blowing; Bhima ran through the house, setting fire to it in many places, beginning with the door; then he slipped out with his mother and brothers through the tunnel.

Roused by the crackling flames, the townspeople gathered around the palace, standing there helpless the whole night, and concluded that Purochana had succeeded in burning the Pandava brothers alive.

But the Pandavas made their way through the darkness till they came to the banks of the Ganga; they crossed over in a boat, proceeding south, guided by the stars. They were tired and thirsty and sleepy, but the indefatigable Bhima easily lifted his mother and four brothers on his shoulders, and continued to push ahead until he laid them down, completely exhausted, to sleep in a forest clearing, with himself keeping watch.

Not far from the clearing, high up in a sal tree, lived a rakshasa named Hidimba; he was pot-bellied, red-bearded and red-headed, fierce-faced—and a cannibal. Scenting human flesh, he turned to his sister. "My mouth waters; my eight teeth long to taste soft human meat, warm human blood. Find out who they are, sleeping in my forest. Go at once!—Tonight we shall feast on human flesh, tonight we shall dance around human corpses!"

But when the cannibal's sister found Bhima, and saw him sitting awake, straight as a sal tree, she fell in love with him. *This lion-shouldered and golden-armed, lotus-eyed and conch-necked man*, she said to herself, *shall be my husband. I shall not obey my brother's orders.* She quickly assumed a ravishingly lovely female form, and approached Bhima with modest smiles.

"Who are you, sir? and who are your sleeping friends? Do you not know that this forest belongs to a wicked rakshasa, my brother Hidimba? He will kill you. But let me save you, for I love you and want you for my husband."

"You are a fool to think that I will abandon my sleeping brothers and mother in order to gratify my senses," said Bhima, and would not listen to her repeated entreaties.

Wondering why his sister had not returned, Hidimba ran to the clearing, and saw her disguised as a young girl, wearing garlands round her neck, her face like a full moon, her nails lightly painted, dressed in filmy clothes. Shouting "Filthy, lustful woman!" he ran murderously at her.

But Bhima blocked him, saying, "Stop! Why blame her? Blame the god of love, if you must. Blame me, because I stirred love in her. No one lifts a hand against a woman in my presence Fight me!"

Hidimba rushed at him; Bhima caught his arms and dragged him ten feet along the ground, like a lion dragging its prey. Hidimba howled in pain, and Bhima dragged him away still further, afraid that the noise might waken the sleepers.

But Kunti woke and saw Hidimba's "lovely" sister sitting near her.

"I am the sister of a rakshasa, I am in love with your son."

The four brothers woke up together, and saw Bhima and Hidimba grappling like two powerful lions.

"Kill him quickly," shouted Arjuna. "Dawn is breaking, and rakshasas gain terrible strength in the interval between the two twilights. Don't play with him—use your arms!"

Bhima lifted the rakshasa high, and whirled his blue body a hundred times over his head.

"Are you tired, Bhima?" shouted Arjuna. "Let me finish him then."

Bhima, furious, hurled the rakshasa to the ground. A terrifying wail, like the sound of a wet drum, filled the forest. Bhima held the body between his hands, bending it double, till it snapped in two.

Then they left, followed by the rakshasa's sister. "Go," said Bhima, "or I will kill you as I killed your brother."

"Leave her alone," Yudhishthira told his angered brother. "She may be a rakshasa, but she is only a woman. What can she do to us?"

The sister bowed before Kunti. "I love him, my lady. Let your son be my husband. I implore you, let me take him where I want. I promise you, I will bring him back."

Answering for Kunti, Yudhishthira said, "That you love him is evident. But be sure you keep your promise. Bhima will go with you wherever you want till the sun sets; you must bring him back to us before nightfall."

"I will stay with you," added Bhima, "till you give birth to a son."

She picked up Bhima and flew to the mountains,
There, in regions sacred to the gods,
Studded with cattle, and sweet with tribal music,
She made him happy.
Again, in forests and hills thick with flowers,
On floating lakes of lotus and lily,
By hill streams and mountain rivers,
By seashores and woods where ascetics roam,
Beside the banks of the Manasarovara,

She made him happy.

A mighty son was born, with ears like arrow-heads and coppery lips, a child who grew up into a young man the moment he was born. They called him Ghatotkacha, and he left with his mother when she honoured the Pandavas, and went north, promising to return if they should ever need help. Some say it was Indra who created Ghatotkacha—to make a man who might match the prowess of Karna, because Karna had received from Indra the special divine arrow as a gift.

The Pandavas continued their wanderings, going from forest to forest, passing through many kingdoms—of the Matsyas, the Panchalas, and the Kichakas. Their hair grew long, like that of ascetics, and they dressed themselves in deerskin and soft bark. In the course of their travels, they came to the place where their grandfather, Vyasa, was living.

"I knew Duryodhana would treat you unfairly," said Vyasa, "and I will give you some good advice. Forget the past—everything will add up to your good. I used to look upon you and the sons of Dhritarashtra impartially, but now your sufferings compel my sympathy. Not far from here is a pleasant town where no one will be able to find you. Disguise yourselves and wait for me there."

In the town of Ekachakra they found shelter in a Brahmin's house, and the townsfolk were kind to them. Every evening the Pandavas would place before Kunti whatever alms-food they had collected during the day, each content with receiving his share as divided by Kunti.

Nursing his grudge, Drupada, King of the Panchalas, began meanwhile to propitiate the gods, praying for a son who would kill Drona. And as a saintly Brahmin, Yaj, sprinkled ghee on the sacrificial fire, there arose from the flames a child who looked like a god; he had a crown on his head and a sword in his hand; he carried a bow and arrows and wore armour. A voice from the sky declared: `*This child is born for the destruction of Drona. The fame of the Panchalas will spread. The sorrow of their king will end.*

From the centre of the sacrificial altar there rose also a girl.

Her eyes were black and lotus-large, her hair fell in blue waves, and she was dark-skinned; her curved nails shone bright as copper, her eyebrows were fair, her breasts heavy; and her body gave out the fragrance of a blue lotus. The Brahmins named the boy Dhristadyumna, because he was brave and born with armour, and the girl, Draupadi, was known also as Krishnā, the Dark-Skinned One.

While living disguised in Ekachakra, the Pandavas were visited by Vyasa. They stood up as he entered, greeting him in silence with folded palms. He enquired after their health, and said:

"Once there was a lovely daughter of a great sage whose karma prevented her from finding a husband. After she had propitiated Shiva, she obtained his promise to grant her whatever she wished. 'I want a husband who has all the virtues,' she said. 'You shall have five husbands,' promised Shiva. When she said 'But I want only one' Shiva replied, 'Did you not say *Give me a husband* five times? In a future incarnation you shall have five husbands.' That girl has been born, O princes—she is Draupadi, daughter of King Drupada. Go to his capital and make her your wife."

Vyasa went his way, and the brothers prepared to leave for the kingdom of the Panchalas. On their journey they met many brahmachari Brahmins, who accompained them to the *svayamvara* ceremony of Draupadi. The brothers stayed with a potter in the outskirts of the capital, and slipped into the city unrecognized.

King Drupada had ordered a huge bow to be fashioned, so strong that none could bend it; in the sky, directly above the bow, was suspended a target. "The man who strings this bow and hits the centre of the target shall marry my daughter, " ordered Drupada, and declared the *svayamvara* open.

There came to the palace holy men,
Duryodhana and Karna, and many Brahmins,
Kings from many countries, all respectfully received.
A sea of shouts rose from the assembled citizens.
Multi-coloured draperies shaded the hall,
Trumpets sounded, aloe and sandalwood breathed fragrance,
Gold filigree in the windows, diamonds studded in the walls,
Spacious staircases, rich carpets, and fragrant garlands every-

where. . .

The visitors were housed in seven-storied palaces. On the sixteenth day, Draupadi adorned herself and entered the hall carrying a golden plate of offerings and a flower garland. Dhristadyumna took her arm and his voice, loud as a kettledrum, hushed the assembly:

"This is the bow, up there is the target, here are the five arrows. The man who shoots all five into the target through the hole in the contraption shall marry my sister Draupadi." He turned to his sister and recited to her, in turn, the names of all the assembled lords of the earth.

They rose, one by one, and faced the great bow. But, hard as they tried, they could not even lift it from the ground. Some, straining to the point of exhaustion, fell down fainting; others, panting deeply, retired, all their hopes dashed.

Then came Karna, son of the sun god. He picked up the bow with ease, and as easily strung the arrow. The Pandavas saw him take aim, and feared it was all over. Suddenly Draupadi shouted: "I will not marry a man of low caste!"

Karna smiled bitterly, looked once at the sun, and flung aside the fully-bent bow.

The noble Shishupala tried next and was flung to the ground on his knees to the ground. King Jarasandha rose and fell likewise, as did Shalya, King of Madra, and Duryodhana.

When Arjuna came forward, some looked happy, others were envious. The Brahmins shook their deer skins, and fell to arguing on his skill.

Walking round the bow, Arjuna invoked the Giver of Favours and bowed his head; then he thought of Krishna, and lightly picked up the bow. Swiftly he strung it, shot all five arrows, and the riddled target fell through the hole in the contraption to the ground. Roars of applause filled the hall, and the gods showered flowers on Arjuna's head.

Filled with joy, Draupadi, dressed in white, placed a garland round his neck, and Arjuna walked out of the hall with his bride.

In the meantime, Kunti had become anxious, fearing that Duryodhana might have recognized her sons and killed them, or that some rakshasa had trapped them. Late that silent afternoon, Arjuna and his brothers entered the potter's house (where they were now hiding) and shouted, "We have a gift for you, mother."

"Share it equally among yourselves," Kunti called back, from inside the house.

But when she came out to greet them and saw Draupadi, she regretted her words. Taking Draupadi by the hand, she went to Yudhishthira. "What shall I do? I thought you had come with alms."

Yudhishthira pondered deeply, and said to Arjuna, "You won her, Arjuna. She is your wife. Take her hand and light the sacred fire."

"No," said Arjuna. "That would be wrong. You are the eldest—she is your wife first, then Bhima's, then mine, and after that Nakula and Sahadeva's Tell us what is proper in this case, and we will do as you say."

They all looked at Draupadi. She looked at them. Then they looked at one another; and sat down. And Yudhishthira knew the god of love had entered all their hearts. Fearing a rift and recalling the words of Vyasa, he announced:

"She will be our common wife."

Unknown to them, they had been followed by Dhrishtadyumna to the potter's house. Hidden in a corner of the house, Dhrishtadyumna saw the brothers returning from alms-begging and giving everything to Yudhishthira. He heard Kunti tell Draupadi, "Take a portion of this and feed it to the gods, Brahmins, and our guests. Divide the remainder into two equal portions. Give one portion to Bhima—he is a good eater. Divide the other half into six parts, four for the brothers, one for me, and one for you." After eating, the brothers lay down on a bed of kusha grass, their heads facing south. Kunti lay beside the row of heads, and Draupadi at the feet.

Next morning Dhristadyumna reported to King Drupada all that he had seen, and Drupada, still unaware of the real identity of the Pandavas, hurried to the potter's house.

"Who are you—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or gods? Tell me the truth, for I shall make preparations for the marriage ceremony accordingly."

"We are Kshatriyas, sons of Pandu," replied Yudhishthira. "Your daughter is like a lotus moved from one lake to another.

Rest easy in your mind, O King."

They were taken to the palace, and treated with the greatest respect. One day King Drupada went to Yudhishthira, and said, "The marriage rites wait to be fulfilled. Tell Arjuna to come with my daughter."

"But I must marry too," said Yudhishthira.

"You are welcome to marry her yourself if you like," said Drupada. "Or marry her to any of the brothers, if that is your wish."

"But she is our common wife. Our mother ordered it. We have always shared equally whatever we had. Your daughter shall take our hands, one after another, in front of the sacred fire."

"I have heard of the practice of polygamy," replied Drupada, "but this is the first time I hear of one wife having many husbands. You know this is wrong, Yudhishthira, and the Vedas forbid it. Have you lost your mind?"

"What is moral is sometimes very subtle," said Yudhishthira. "I have always spoken the truth, and I have always tried to avoid doing wrong. But I'm certain about this—our mother ordered it, and my conscience approves of it. That, for me, is enough."

"You, your mother, and my son Dhristadyumna must settle this between yourselves. Tell me tomorrow what you have decided."

Even as they were talking Vyasa arrived in the city in the course of his wanderings. They seated him on a gold carpet and paid him their respects.

"How is it possible, O holy one," asked Drupada, "for one woman to have many husbands without defiling dharma?"

"True, the custom is obsolete," said Vyasa. "The Vedas do not sanction it. But tell me what you think of it."

Drupada spoke up first. "The practice is against dharma, sanctioned neither in the Vedas nor by tradition. Never have I seen several men with one wife."

"Morality is a tricky business," said Dhrishtadyumna. "Why is it within dharma for an elder brother, if well-meaning, to make advances to the wife of a younger brother? Who knows what's absolutely moral? But this I know—I can't with a good conscience allow my sister to become the wife of five men."

Yudhishthira said, "In the Puranas there is the story of Jatila, the virtuous girl who married seven sages. And I have heard of another ascetic's daughter who married ten brothers. Is not obedience to one's superiors recommended? And is not a mother the foremost among superiors? We are doing only what Kunti advised. I do not think that can be wrong in any way."

Kunti said, "What Yudhishthira says is right. He is doing only what I ordered."

When they had finished giving their opinions, Vyasa said, "This is not the time for a lecture. But I can say this much—Yudhishthira is within the dharma in saying what he does. This is an old and honoured practice, which I will explain to you in private." He led Drupada by the hand to another room and launched into a lengthy discourse on the practice of permissible polyandry, while the others waited.

"Your daughter, Drupada," he concluded, "obtained a favour from Shiva, as a result of which she will be married now to five husbands."

"If that is Shiva's wish, who am I to speak of right or wrong? Let them marry her, and let us rejoice," said Drupada.

The learned priest Dhaumya conducted the wedding ceremony. Yudhishthira took Draupadi's hand first, and the other brothers in succession on the next four days. It was Dhaumya who said that the slim-waisted bride regained her virginity after each ceremony. A lavish dowry was bestowed by King Drupada—each bridegroom received a hundred chariots with golden banners, each drawn by four golden-reined horses, a hundred elephants like a hundred golden-peaked mountains, and a hundred young and attractive female servants.

Kunti blessed her daughter-in-law. "Be happy, my daughter. Bear many brave and long-lived sons. Be devoted to your husbands, be kind to guests and strangers. Today's red silk makes you so lovely—may you look lovely again as the mother of a son."

Gifts came also from Krishna, chief of the Yadavas and of the Pandavas—pearl-studded jewellery and lapis lazuli; rich robes; soft blankets and hides; gold and gem-inlaid drinking vessels; thousands of maids distinguished by beauty, youth and accomplishment; many chariots pulled by white-teethed horses; and a treasure in golden coins.

When spies brought news of the consummation of Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas, Duryodhana was deeply pained. Duhshasana, who was ashamed, offered an explanation. "Arjuna could never have married her if he had not disguised himself as a Brahmin. We have been tricked! The fates are against us—the Pandavas are alive and flourishing."

"Do you say so, Vidura? You think so?" said Dhritarashtra, mistakenly thinking that Duryodhana had succeeded in winning Draupadi's hand, and immediately ordered ornaments to be fashioned for the bride. When Vidura told him the truth, he muttered:

"The Pandavas are as dear to me as my own sons. More dear, more dear. Who would not welcome having Drupada as an ally?"

But when Vidura left, Duryodhana and Karna came and said: "We did not dare say anything in Vidura's presence. But now you are alone. . . . Why do you praise the Pandavas? Let us unite against our common enemy before he swallows us all."

"I agree with your sentiments, but I did not think it prudent to let Vidura guess," replied Dhritarashtra. "It was a ruse on my part. Tell me your plan."

"Let us plant trusted Brahmins in their midst to sow dissension between Kunti's sons and Madri's sons. Let us make them jealous; let us stir Draupadi against her husbands. Or somehow rouse the Pandavas against her. But, most important of all, we must get rid of Bhima, who is a terror."

"Words, big words," said Karna. "Do you think such schemes will work? What were you doing all these years when they were living near you? Now they are grown-up and—take my word for it—wiser. Do you think you could turn Draupadi against them? She chose them when they were poor Brahmins; will she leave them now that they are rich Kshatriyas? One thing alone will work: force. A Kshatriya understands force. Crush them, and rule the earth. No other way."

"You are a great fighter," said Dhritarashtra, "and you speak like one. But consult among yourselves—talk with Bhishma, Drona and Vidura, and then do what will benefit us all."

Asked by Dhritarashtra for his opinion, Bhishma replied:

"I have not much experience of family feuds, but I respect you as I respected Pandu. The sons of Gandhari are to me the same as the sons of Kunti. Make a pact with the Pandavas, and give them half the kingdom. If the kingdom is not theirs by right, by what right is it yours? Give them half the kingdom, and end the matter. This will help us all. Any other course will bring us dishonour. What is the point in living with a tarnished name? Till honour lasts, a man lives; honour gone, think no more of him, he is dead."

"Bhishma takes the words out of my mouth," declared Drona. "Give the Pandavas a share in the kingdom. Let us send gifts to King Drupada and gold ornaments to Draupadi."

"Strange advice," remarked Duryodhana, "coming from favourites of the court, and our two most trusted friends! What is written, will be—so how will advice help? If this kingdom is destined to be yours, it will remain yours; if not, it will go to its destined rulers. But later on, remember those who gave you good advice, and those who meant harm."

"Those who intend harm think others mean harm," replied Drona. "Why don't you say openly that you hate the Pandavas? If all that I have said is bad, have the goodness to tell us what you think is good."

Vidura said quickly, "Your friends desire your welfare, Sire, and you know who they are. Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni are young, foolish, and full of hate. Ignore them, Sire. I have already warned you once that Duryodhana will bring destruction on our house."

"I like what you, Bhishma, and Drona have said," Dhritarashtra said to Vidura. "The right to the kingdom is as much the Pandavas' as my sons'. It is our good fortune that they are alive, that they have married Draupadi. Go, bring them here, together with Kunti."

Vidura immediately left and, finding the Pandavas, courteously enquired after their health on behalf of Dhritarashtra. Then, with Drupada's permission, the Pandavas returned to Hastinapura. As they arrived, the citizens thronged around them, and the city radiated joy. Reaching the palace, they touched the feet of Dhritarashtra and Bhishma and all the elders deserving their respect.

"It is my advice to you that you should go to the city of Indraprastha and live there and rule half the kingdom as yours," said Dhritarashtra. "There will then be no cause for conflict with your cousins."

The Pandavas agreed, and set out immediately for Indraprastha, with Krishna at their head. There they dug a moat, wide as the sea, around the city, and built white sky-high battlements, where soldiers with weapons that looked like double-tongued serpents stood guard. Sharp hooks jutted from the walls, and death-dealing machines were fixed on the inside.

To the city came Brahmins and merchants;
The gardens sang with the kokila and the peacock's cry;
Pleasure-houses, bright like mirrors, were constructed;
Swan, duck and sheldrake swam in lotus-filled pools.

One day Narada, the sage of the gods, visited the Pandavas, and was received with great courtesy by Yudhishthira. Draupadi came before him veiled and touched his feet. When she left the room, Narada turned to Yudhishthira.

"You must make sure no friction arises between your brothers because you have a common wife. You know the story of the brothers Sunda and Upasunda who ruled the same kingdom, sat on the same throne, ate the same food, even slept in the same bed, yet killed each other because of Tilottama."

Yudhishthira and his brothers then decided that any one of them who discovered a brother making love to Draupadi would have to retire to the forest for twelve years of exile, and live as a brahmachari.

Just as the river Sarasvati enjoys elephants playing in her waters and the elephants enjoy her, Draupadi delighted in her five husbands and they delighted in her. It so happened that one day a Brahmin rushed to the Pandavas with the complaint that robbers were stealing his cattle. "This is happening in your kingdom! A Brahmin's holy butter stolen by a pack of crows!" Arjuna assured the Brahmin he would rescue the cows, and went to get his bow. But Yudhishthira was in the room where the weapons were kept, and with him was Draupadi. Seeing them alone together, Arjuna hesitated; and then ran in, greeted Yudhishthira casually, and went out with his bow. He pursued and routed the robbers, restoring the cattle to the Brahmin.

When he returned, all congratulated him, but he went straight to Yudhishthira:

"I have broken the promise I made. I walked in when you were alone with Draupadi. Therefore I must go into exile for twelve years."

"But why?" said Yudhishthira, extremely dismayed. "I know why you entered the room. I feel no insult. A younger brother is allowed to enter when an elder brother is sitting alone with his wife, but an elder brother is not. I will not let you go. You have not displeased me."

"You used to tell us not to quibble when it came to doing one's duty. The truth is the truth. I have broken my promise," said Arjuna.

And so Arjuna left--to live in the forest for twelve years. Crossing many lakes and rivers, through forests and distant provinces, he came at last to the source of the Ganga, and decided to camp there. While bathing in the Ganga one day and paying respects to his ancestors, Arjuna felt a tug at his leg. It was Ulupi, daughter of the Naga King, pulling him down (because she had fallen in love with him), further and further down till they reached the palace of Kaurava, King of the Nagas. "Who are you?" asked Arjuna. "Where am I?"

"My name is Ulupi. I am the Naga king's daughter. I am still a virgin and I am in love with you. Arjuna, give yourself up to me."

"I have vowed to live a brahmachari for twelve years. I will help you, but tell me how I may do it without breaking my vow."

"Your vow of celibacy relates to Draupadi only," said Ulupi. "It is not broken if you make love to me. Help me, or I will kill myself."

Keeping dharma in mind, Arjuna gratified her wishes, spending the night in the palace. In the morning he rose and left, carrying a boon from Ulupi—"No creature of the sea will ever defeat Arjuna."

At the foothills of the Himalayas, he came to the kingdom of Manipura, there he met King Chitravahana and his beautiful daughter Chitrangada, and was filled with desire to possess her.

"Give me your daughter, sire," he said to Chitravahana. "I am the son of a Kshatriya, third-born in the house of Pandu and Kunti."

"I have only this girl," replied the King, "and no son. Her son will continue my dynasty. If I may have her son, you may have her."

Arjuna agreed and stayed three years in Manipura as the husband of Chitrangada. When a son was born, Arjuna embraced him tenderly and set out on his wanderings again.

He came to the shores of the southern ocean, to the five regions shunned by holy men. When Arjuna enquired why the regions were uninhabited, he was told:

"Whoever bathes in their lakes is devoured by five large crocodiles."

But Arjuna plunged in. A giant crocodile seized his leg. Arjuna grappled with the creature and dragged it ashore. Suddenly the crocodile changed into a lovely shining girl, adorned with celestial jewels. "I am Yaga, an apsara loved by Kuvera, god of wealth. Because I and four of my friends tempted a Brahmin, he put a curse on us: we would be crocodiles in these waters for a hundred years. But we pleaded and we pleaded; finally he said we would be crocodiles only until a noble person dragged us ashore."

Arjuna then freed the apsara's four friends as well, and returned to Manipura to see Chitrangada and his son Vabhruvahana for the last time, after which he set out for Gokarna. There he met his cousin Krishna again, who embraced him and asked the reason for his ceaseless wanderings. For many days he lived in friendship with the members of the Yadava clan, and stayed in Krishna's breathtakingly beautiful palace.

Walking with Krishna one day during the great festival of the Yadavas, Arjuna saw a girl surrounded by her maids and fell in love with her. Krishna looked at him and smilingly asked:

"I thought you were a brahmachari. She is my sister Subhadra. If you really love her, I could speak on your behalf to my father."

"Vasudeva's daughter and your sister," Arjuna replied. "No wonder she stole my heart. If I marry your sister, all things will prosper for me. Tell me how I can win her. To please her, I will do all that is possible for man to do."

"Kshatriya girls choose their own husbands," replied Krishna. "But if I understand my sister at all, I doubt she knows what's good for her. Run away with her! Don't give her a chance. Abduct her!"

They sent a messenger who explained the plan to Yudhishthira at Indraprastha, and secured his approval.

The lovely Subhadra was returning to the palace from a hill where she had gone to worship the gods, when Arjuna galloped up in his golden chariot, lifted her into it, and sped off in the direction of Indraprastha. Her guards ran back to the capital with the news, and the Yadava chiefs rose, flushed with wine, shouting "Bring the chariots!" "Bring our weapons!" Then Krishna stood up and said:

"Have you lost your senses? What has Arjuna done that so upsets you? You know a girl's own choice of a husband isn't always right. You also know we don't like selling daughters in marriage, to be bought by the highest bidder. Arjuna is the best match we can get. Only Shiva is his superior. Go, call him back."

Arjuna stayed in Dvaraka, the capital of the Yadavas, for a year enjoying the pleasures of married life, and passed the remaining years of his self-exile in Pushkara. Then he returned to Indraprastha, paying his respects first to Yudhishthira, then to the Brahmins, and going next to Draupadi.

"Here already, Arjuna?" she said. "I thought you preferred the company of Subhadra. They say a second stick loosens the position of the first stick in the bundle."

Arjuna reassured her and begged to be forgiven. He dressed Subhadra as a cowherdess, and sent her to the inner quarters reserved for women. Lovely even in that simple dress, the lotus-eyed Subhadra touched Kunti's feet Kunti blessed her warmly. Then Subhadra touched Draupadi's feet, saying, "I am your maid." Quickly Draupadi rose, "Be blessed, girl. May your husband have no enemy." Delighted, Subhadra thanked her. They lived happily together from then on, and Kunti was also happy. Krishna stayed with them, hunting deer and boar with Arjuna in the forests on the outskirts of the lovely city of Indraprastha.

When Subhadra gave birth to a son Abhimanyu, who had long arms, a broad chest and large eyes, Yudhishthira distributed ten thousand cattle and gold coins to Brahmins. And Draupadi bore sons at one-year intervals: Partivindhya by Yudhishthira, Shrutasoma by Bhima, Shrutakarman by Arjuna, Shatanika by Nakula, and Shrutasena by Sahadeva. Dhaumya invested each of them with the sacred thread, and they lived happily together, skilled in the

Vedas and in the use of weapons.

Many kingdoms were subdued by the Pandavas in the course of their reign at Indraprastha. And Yudhishthira ruled with wisdom, paying appropriate regard to Artha, Dharma and Kama, as if each was an alter ego.

"Let us go to the banks of the Yamuna," said Arjuna to Krishna one day, "sport there in the waters, and return in the evening."

To the tree-shaded pleasure garden,
Flower-perfumed and gem-adorned,
The group of people went—
Each making merry according to his or her pleasure,
The full-lipped and heavy breasted ladies,
Large-eyed, a little unsteady from their wine,
Wandering amid flowers or splashing in the water,
Flirting and joking, with Krishna setting the example,
Wine-flushed Draupadi and Subhadra discarding ornaments,
Some singing or dancing,
Some quarrelling, some secretive,
The whole scene echoing the seductive sounds
Of flute and vina and kettledrum.

Arjuna and Krishna chose a secluded spot and, sitting on luxurious cushions, began to talk casually. A Brahmin came to them, tall like a sal tree, with skin the colour of burnt gold and a vermillion beard streaked with green, eyes like lotus leaves. He shone like the morning sun. Quickly they rose, and he said: "I am Agni. Give me food."

"What food shall we give you, sir?" they asked.

"Food that agrees with me, food that is fire. I would like to eat this forest, which is guarded by Indra. Whenever I try, he pours water from the clouds. But you have excellent weapons which can help me. Use them when I begin devouring the trees, and hold the waters in check."

The two warriors stationed themselves on opposite sides of the forest, and began a slaughter of the creatures in it. So swift were their chariots that occasionally they blurred into a single movement, and the two warriors seemed to merge into a single person.

While the forest burned, animals and humans rushed helter-skelter, screaming in panic. Some died calmly, without fleeing, unable to leave their children behind; others wailed, falling as their forest rivers began to boil, and as the burning verdure roasted the fish and tortoises. Birds trying to fly to safety were shot by Arjuna; they screamed and fell. The noise was like the divine churning of the ocean; the flames rose to the sky and made the gods anxious. They approached Indra, asking, "Is it the end of the world? Why is Agni burning everything below?"

The flight continued—rakshasas and nagas, wolves, bears, bruised elephants, lions, deer and buffalo, and hundreds of birds. They saw Krishna and Arjuna standing armed and were paralysed with fear. Then, mercilessly, Krishna hurled his divine discuss at them, cutting them down in hundreds. Protected by Krishna and Arjuna, Agni burned the forest for a full fortnight, sparing only six dwellers; Ashvasena, the rakshasa Maya, and the four birds known as the Sharngakas. Then he sat down and feasted happily on rivers of blood and marrow.

"You did something for me even a god could not have done," said Agni. "Ask a boon."

Arjuna asked for all the divine weapons of Indra, and these were promised to him.

Then Agni extinguished himself. "You have been tigers among men. Wherever you go, you shall be like tigers."

Then Krishna and Arjuna, taking Maya with them, wandered for a while, before stopping beside the banks of a delightful river.

The Second Book: The Assembly

While Krishna, Arjuna and Maya relaxed together, Maya bowed to Arjuna and said: "Because you have saved me from this terrible fire, tell me what you wish me to do for you."

"Enough for me that you should ask," replied Arjuna. "Go where you like. Be kind to people."

"Arjuna, ask me again," insisted Maya. "I am a great artisan. Command me anything."

"The fact that you say I saved you is reward enough for me," Arjuna repeated. "I want nothing. But, if you insist, ask Krishna."

Thinking quickly, Krishna commanded Maya, "Build a vast palace, so wonderful that no mortal will be able to copy it even after the closest inspection; a palace which combines the finest in divine, anti-divine, and human architecture."

Maya went to work instantly and in fourteen months produced a palace that rivalled the abode of the gods themselves. It covered one hundred thousand square feet of land, suited for all seasons and eye-captivating. Eight thousand giant copper-eyed rakshasas known as the Kinkaras guarded it.

In its centre was a pool of golden lotus,
Where swam all kinds of birds;
In the clear water were fish,
A flight of crystal stairs led to the water's edge,
A border of marble inlaid with pearl—
One would think water was land and step on to it!
Perennial green-shading trees surrounded the palace,
And forests breathed delicate fragrance;
The people lived happily,
Soothed by scents wafted from land and lake lotuses.

To celebrate his possession of the palace, Yudhishthira fed ten thousand Brahmins with food prepared from milk and rice mixed with butter and honey, with fruits and vegetables, pork and venison. He gave each Brahmin new clothes, garlands, and a thousand cattle. "Holy! Holy!" chanted the Brahmins, in voices that reached to the sky. He called kings and ascetics from many countries. Among them was Narada, the sage of the gods, a man of formidable learning: he could recite all the epics and the Puranas; skilled in Nyaya and the truths of moral science; expert in the six disciplines of pronunciation, grammar, prosody, word-definition, descriptions of rituals, and astronomy; master of treaty-making, war, marching, defence, guerilla tactics, and reinforcements.

Yudhishthira and his brothers dutifully stood up when Narada entered, bowed low, and offered him a seat.

"How are you, Yudhishthira?" enquired Narada. "Do you put the six kingly qualities of cleverness, readiness, intelligence in dealing with enemies, memory, knowledge of politics, and devotion to ethics to good use?

"Are your seven principal officers, the governor of the fort, the commander-in-chief, the chief justice, the chief of police, the royal physician, the political adviser, and the chief astrologer loyal to you?

"Is it your policy to be neutral to strangers and to kings who are neutral to you?

"Have you good teachers to instruct the princes and army officers in dharma and the various sciences?

"Do you keep an eye on your enemies without their knowing it?

"Is the priest you honour humble, pure, respected, charitable and forgiving?

"Are your high posts filled by incorruptible officers dedicated to the service of the people?

"Do your ministers ever make fun of you, like priests making fun of the poor unable to perform a sacrifice, or wives making fun of licentious husbands?

"Do you recognize learning and humility with suitable rewards of wealth and honour?

"Are your soldiers paid on time? Do you give gold and jewels to important enemy officers to buy them over?

"Before you declare war, do you exhaust the four arts of conciliation: gift of wealth, sowing dissension, negotiation, and show of force?

"Is your budget balanced?

"Are the four professions of agriculture, trade, cattle-raising and money-lending run by honest men?

"Are the women protected in your kingdom? And I hope you trust them with no state secrets!

"Do you cure physical illness with medicines and fasts, and mental illness with the advice of gurus and elders?

"Are wise men and Brahmins respected? You know that such respect brings rewards.

"Do you stay away from all the fourteen vices of kings—hedonism, atheism, anger, rashness, procrastination, not consulting the learned, laziness, nervousness, following only one man's counsel, taking the advice of mercenary friends, abandoning a settled plan, revealing state secrets, financing unproductive projects, and acting on sudden impulses?

"Even the best of kings can ruin themselves."

"Tell us, holy Narada," said Yudhishthira, "how the Vedas bear fruit, how wealth, a wife, and knowledge of the Shastras bear fruit."

"The Vedas bear fruit when the person who has studied them performs the Agnihotra and other sacrifices. Wealth bears fruit when the man who has enjoyed it gives it away in charity, a wife when she becomes a mother, and knowledge of the scriptures when it leads to humility and good character."

"I am satisfied, and will do as you say," said Yudhishthira; and he did, gaining in course of time the whole country as his kingdom. When Narada went away, accompanied by all the holy men who had gathered for the celebration, Yudhishthira made up his mind to perform the greatest of all sacrifices, the Rajasuya.

Tirelessly, without anger, pride or discrimination, he worked for the welfare of his people. His advice was always: "Give to every person what that person needs and deserves." His subjects praised him—*Blessed is Yudhishthira! Blessed is Yudhishthira*!—and the kingdom prospered. It prospered because of the honest traders and workers and also because the voluptuaries of wealth indulged in liberal spending.

During this time Krishna came to pay a visit to his aunt Kunti; after he had rested in a pleasant guest room, Yudhishthira approached him with his new concern.

"I have made up my mind to perform the Rajasuya. But you know that deciding is one thing, and doing another. My friends and advisers advise me to proceed. But friends don't always see the problems involved, and advisers are always flattering. Because you are above these things, O Krishna, I ask you for your opinion."

"You are worthy of the Rajasuya," Krishna replied. "But King Jarasandha still defies you. I remember when I had to flee from Mathura to Dvaravati in order to escape from his soldiers. Destroy him, and set free the kings under his subjugation; then perform the great sacrifice. This is my advice: the rest I leave to your judgment."

"You are right," said Yudhishthira, "but if you had to flee from his might, how will I challenge him? I am not sure that even you, or Bhima, or Arjuna could kill him."

Bhima said quickly, "A clever king knows many ways of defeating an enemy. Krishna has cunning, I am strong, Arjuna brave. Together we are more than a match for the king of Magadha."

"Only a fool plans without some certainty of success," Krishna explained. "Jarasandha is also eager for the Rajasuya, and has eightysix kings confined in the temple of Shiva. When he captures a hundred, his persecution will begin. Let us join forces before that happens."

"My mind is still not easy," said Yudhishthira. "Yama himself cannot tame the fierce Jarasandha. Bhima and Arjuna are my two eyes, and you, Krishna, are my conscience. How will I live if anything happens to you? It seems best to me that we give up the idea."

Arjuna showed Yudhishthira his divine bow and inexhaustible quiver. "There is nothing like power. Let us fight!"

"Who knows when death comes?" added Krishna. "Arjuna is right. Refusal to fight never brought a Kshatriya immortality. Let us plan well and strike swiftly. Hansa and Dimvaka have surrendered, Kansa has been killed and his army routed. There is no time to lose."

Disguised as *snataka* Brahmins, Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima made their way to Magadha, the fabulous city of wealth, cattle, trees and pools. But his priests had warned Jarasandha of evil omens, and he had taken precautions by way of protective vows and fasts. When the brothers entered the city, they marvelled at the variety of food and flowers in the shops which were filled with all conceivable kinds of rare and costly goods. They snatched whatever garlands they wanted, and strode boldly to the palace. Jarasandha rose to greet them, offering them cattle as presents.

"You are welcome, holy men," he said.

Arjuna and Bhima kept silent, and Krishna explained, "My companions are pledged to silence till midnight: they will speak to you after that."

Remembering the prediction that said that if any *snataka* Brahmin came to his palace, he should grant them immediate audience, Jarasandha looked at them respectfully. At midnight he went to their room.

"Soon you will attain moksha," said Krishna to Jarasandha and looked at Arjuna and Bhima meaningfully.

"I thank you. But please be seated," said Jarasandha.

They sat down, blazing in glory like three fires at a sacrifice.

Jarasandha asked, "Who are you? I have never heard of Brahmins keeping the *snataka* vow decorating themselves with sandal paste and wearing garlands. You say you are Brahmins, but you behave like Kshatriyas. What are you hiding from me? Why will you not accept my worship?"

The clever Krishna replied calmly and seriously, "We are *snataka* Brahmins. Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are allowed to observe the vow too, and its rules are very complex. Garlands are symbols of suspiciousness: so we wear them. We cannot accept your worship because we consider you our enemy."

"But what have I done ?" asked Jarasandha. "Have I ever hurt you in any way? Why should an innocent man suddenly become your enemy? You do me great wrong in treating me in this way."

"We come here at the command of a king," replied Krishna. "You say you are innocent. But what about the kings you are holding prisoner? We come here as the protectors of the distressed, and to kill the persecutor of our relatives. I am Krishna, and these are Arjuna and Bhima. We challenge you to fight us. Either set free all the kings, or die."

"My prisoners are kings whom I have defeated. Is it unlawful to hold them?" asked Jarasandha. "Isn't that what all Kshatriyas do? I have promised to offer them as sacrifice to Shiva—do you think threats will make me change my mind? Let us fight, as you wish, in single combat or all together, army against army. I am ready."

"Choose then," said Krishna. "We shall fight singly. Who is first?"

Jarasandha chose Bhima.

A priest came in with garlands, and lotions while Jarasandha dressed for the combat. Taking off his crown and tying his hair, he stood up, like a stormy ocean heaving. "I choose you, Bhima, because if you defeat me, I shall die happy, knowing a better man was the cause of my death."

Jarasandha rushed at Bhima Roaring like thunder clouds, they slapped under their armpits; they pinioned each other's arms, and locked legs while wrestling, like two trunk-parrying elephants. They feinted and boxed; they twisted legs and arms like vegetable fibres. Crowds gathered to watch. Side-stepping, they lunged at each other's knee-joints, using their long arms which resembled iron maces. For thirteen days in the month of October they grappled in this fashion, without food or sleep, and on the fourteenth day weakness overcame Jarasandha.

"He is tired," Krishna shouted to Bhima. "Fight only with your arms. Use your strength to match his!"

Bhima shouted back, "Why? Let me finish him off!"

"Go ahead," replied Krishna. "Show us your strength."

Bhima lifted the mighty Jarasandha, whirled him a hundred times above his head, pressed his knee against the king's spine, and snapped it in two. Jarasandha roared, and Bhima roared; and the cries spread terror in Magadha. Many children were prematurely born, and the citizens feared that the Himalayas were crumbling Riding in Jarasandha's chariot, Krishna went to release the imprisoned kings.

"We have everything now—weapons, allies, fame, soldiers, plan," said Arjuna to Yudhishthira. "All we need is to fill the treasury."

So they set out, and Bhima subdued the east, Sahadeva the south, Nakula the west, while Arjuna conquered the north.

"The time for the sacrifice has come," said Krishna when the brothers returned victorious.

At Yudhishthira's command, thousands of houses were built for the invited Brahmins. Actors and dancers performed for their enjoyment; "Give" and "Eat" were the only words heard; Yudhishthira distributed thousands of cattle, beds, coins, and girls.

While the assembly of relatives and rulers sat around the sacrificial fire, Bhishma said, "Let the noble Krishna be worshipped at the opening ritual. Our house is honoured by his presence like darkness by sunlight, like a vacuum by a gust of air."

Krishna agreed, but the voice of Shishupala was suddenly heard.

"Why Krishna? How are these other kings less worthy? Poor Pandavas, you know so little of the subtle ways of dharma. . . . Is Krishna the eldest among us? Is he older than his father Vasudeva, who is here in this assembly? Is Krishna the best ally? What is wrong with King Drupada? Is he a guru? Have you forgotten Drona? Is he the great ancestor? What about Vyasa? Why should Bhishma not get the honour—he can die only if he wills to die. Can Krishna do that? What about Ashvatthaman, Duryodhana, Kripa? Krishna is neither priest nor guru nor king. What has got over you, Bhishma, that you select him?

"And you, Krishna, you should be ashamed, accepting an honour you must know you do not deserve. Look at yourself, lapping up flattery, like a dog licking at stolen butter in a corner. The Kurus insult you. Like giving a wife to an impotent husband or like a stage show performed to please a blind man—is this honour, offered to one who is not a king. We have seen through you, O Krishna. We have seen through Yudhishthira and Bhishma. The truth is coming out. You stand exposed."

Shishupala rose from his seat and walked out of the assembly, followed by some of the other kings.

Yudhishthira ran after him, speaking softly: "You have spoken most cruelly, Shishupala. You insult Bhishma by saying he does not know what dharma is. The other kings do not seem to mind. Bhishma knows Krishna better than you do."

"Why waste words with a man who cannot understand why we revere Krishna?" said Bhishma. "Krishna holds the universe together, for which reason we worship him and not others. He is the Creator, the eternal; he is brave, modest, intelligent, humble, handsome, firm, happy, and prosperous. What is there that he does not have? Like the Gayatri among mantras, Krishna is among men. Shishupala has the brains of a little boy. If he thinks this worship is wrong, let him show his disagreement in the proper way!"

Sahadeva spoke up. "If there is a king here who is too proud to worship Krishna, let him answer me!—I place my foot on his head."

He brought his foot forward, and a hush fell on the assembly. They proceeded with the ritual but, when Krishna had been propitiated, Shishupala, his eyes coppery red in anger, shouted: "What are we doing here? Let us fight them!" The kings murmured among themselves, some saying, "Let us act in a way that will show that this part of the rite does not have our approval." Krishna saw they were up to mischief; and Yudhishthira, disturbed by the sea-roaring voices, turned to Bhishma, "They are roused. What shall we do? The sacrifice must be completed."

"Dogs howling at lions," remarked Bhishma. "Let them bark."

"Old, wretched Bhishma," shouted Shishupala, "do you threaten us? Like the blind following the blind, the Kurus follow you. You don't deceive us. So Krishna is great! You say so. Great is Krishna who slaughters cattle and women! Do you think we are fools? Lord of the universe is Krishna, wisest among men is Krishna—tell this to him, Bhishma, he'll believe you. Not us!

"And do you think we don't see through you? Always virtuous, always wise! Virtuous Bhishma, wise Bhishma, abducting Amba though her heart was given to another. Your brother Vichitravirya did not marry her though you brought her to him. Was it virtuous, O Bhishma, to allow another to make love to your brother's widow in your very presence? Call yourself celibate?—let's hope it's not impotence. Where will you get religious merit, Bhishma, you who have no son? Haven't you heard of the bird that utters holy words and eats up its own eggs?

"Jarasandha refused to fight with Krishna, don't you remember? But they killed him, disguised as Brahmins. Virtuous Krishna! He denied he was a Brahmin when Jarasandha offered to wash his feet. If he's lord of the universe, couldn't he be at least a Brahmin? And still the Pandavas believe you! How wonderful, O Bhishma! You women!"

Bhima heard these words and seethed with rage. Three wrinkles, like the Ganga's three tributary streams, appeared on his forehead; he ground his teeth. He was about to leap on Shishupala when Bhishma held him back. Shishupala never flinched, but laughing said:

"Release him, Bhishma! Let him burn like an insect in the fire of my might. And you, Krishna, I defy you too!"

Then Krishna spoke softly to the assembled kings: "This man is my father's sister's son. He razed the city of Dvaraka to the ground. I bore it. He raped the gentle wife of Akrura; disguised as

King Karusha, he raped Bhadra, princess of Ujjain, the intended wife of Karusha. I bore it all—he is my father's sister's son. But now you see the grudge he bears me. He has shown it in front of you, and I shall kill him for it. This fool even wanted my wife Rukmini—and he failed, like a Shudra failing in the Vedas."

Shishupala laughed. "Why don't you tell them the whole story, Krishna? Are you ashamed to do it? Let me help you. His Rukmini was intended to be my bride, and he abducted her. What sort of a man are you, Krishna, to say in front of all these respectable people that your wife was meant to be another's? Like it or leave it, Krishna, that is the truth. Who are you to order me?"

Even as Shishupala spoke, Krishna's mind turned to his divine discus. With the *chakra* in his hand, he said: "A hundred times have I forgiven him, because his mother asked me to, and I gave her that boon. But no more! Now he dies!" He flung the discus and sliced off Shishupala's head; Shishupala toppled like a cliff hit by lightning. A fierce energy gushed out of the corpse and paid homage to the lotus-eyed Krishna before entering his body All marvelled and were silent.

The Rajasuya was re-commenced and completed, and Krishna took leave of Yudhishthira. The difficult sacrifice over, Vyasa appeared before Yudhishthira. "You have done well. I am pleased with your success." Yudhishthira turned to his brothers and said:

"This is the vow I take today.
No more shall I speak harshly,
No more distinguish between my children and others';
No more think of war;
Only follow dharma and gather virtue."

After the rites, Duryodhana stayed on at Indraprastha in the palace of the Pandavas, and along with Sakuni made a close inspection of the building. He found subtle features he had never seen in his own palace at Hastinapura.

One day he stumbled on a crystal sheet on the ground. Taking it to be water, he pulled up his dress; all day he was ashamed of his silliness. Another day he mistook a pool of clear water for solid ground, and fell in fully clothed. Bhima and the servants roared with laughter. Pulled out by the servants, he was given a change. Arjuna and the twins laughed too. Duryodhana kept his eyes lowered and would not look at them. When he pulled up his new clothes to cross a piece of dry land which he mistook for water, they laughed again

Later, thinking a closed crystal door was open, he bumped into it and staggered back reeling. Thinking an open door shut, he reached out to push it and feel on his face. Coming upon an open door, he thought it closed, and walked away. Disgusted, he returned to Hastinapura.

Shakuni one day saw him in a disturbed mood. "Why are you sighing, Duryodhana?" he asked.

Duryodhana replied to his uncle,"No one took Shishupala's side when Krishna killed him. Frightened of the Pandavas, they forgave Krishna; but is that crime so easily forgivable? I am jealous, O Shakuni; I know I should not be, but my heart burns with jealousy on account of Yudhishthira. I cannot live like this. I will throw myself into a fire or drink poison or drown myself. What am I, a man, a woman, a eunuch? Dhritarashtra's glory declines, Yudhishthira's fame grows. They laughed at me, Shakuni, they mocked me in their palace. O, the shame . . . ."

"They are great fighters, those five brothers. It is no use meeting them in battle. But I know of a trick that will trap Yudhishthira," said Shakuni.

"Tell me," urged Duryodhana, "tell me at once."

"There is nothing Yudhishthira loves more than a game of dice, although he is a bad loser. If I ask him, he won't refuse. I am good at dice; there's no one in the three worlds to equal me. I can win all his kingdom from him . . . . But let us get Dhritarashtra's permission first."

"That will be your business," said Duryodhana. "I cannot do it."

Accompanied by Duryodhana, Shakuni went to the blind Dhritarashtra who was seated on his throne. "Duryodhana is wasting away, sire. Private worries assail him. Question him, sire, for his benefit."

"What is the matter, my son," asked Dhritarashtra, "that you are depressed? Do the exquisite beds and lovely girls of this palace fail to satisfy you?"

"Yudhishthira's prosperity is my sickness," replied Duryodhana.

"He gave thirty slave girls each to eighty-eight thousand *snataka* Brahmins. Thousands of others eat daily in his palace on golden plates. Gifts flow there, conches blow in chorus, kings visit in hundreds . . . Shakuni is good at dice. Give him permission to play against Yudhishthira."

"In these matters I follow the advice of my minister Vidura," replied Dhritarashtra. "I will consult him and let you know."

Duryodhana said quickly, "Vidura will never agree. I know him. If you don't give permission, I will kill myself. With me gone, you can rule the kingdom happily with Vidura."

"Very well then," agreed Dhritarashtra, "call the architects and have them construct a handsome palace with a hundred doors and a thousand pillars. Report to me when it is ready." Saying which, he sent for Vidura, whose advice he valued highly. Vidura hurried to the king.

"I fear, sire, this is not a wise decision at all. A dice game will only engender bitterness."

"Let it take place, Vidura," said Dhritarashtra. "If the gods are kind, all will turn out well. With such excellent people as you, Drona, and Bhishma around me, no wrong will touch us. Go, take a fast chariot to Indraprastha, and bring Yudhishthira here. No, do not argue—my mind is made up. Fate rules us all."

But privately he summoned Duryodhana. "Give up this idea, my son. Vidura is against it. And I know his advice is always good. Give up gambling. The dice sow discord; discord ruins a kingdom. Your mother and I have given you what parents should give sons—rank and wealth. You have received a fine education. Why are you unhappy?"

"I am a greedy man," replied Duryodhana. "What I have isn't enough for me. They say a man has no feeling if he isn't jealous of his enemy's success . . . . Bhima laughed at me when I mistook the pool in their palace for ground—I could kill him for that! And when I fell in the pool, Arjuna joined in the laughter, and the sweet tones of Draupadi and her maids' laughter followed as well. They insulted me! When I banged my head against the door, Sahadeva stepped forward, very deeply concerned, saying, 'The door's here—try this one.' And Bhima roared. I don't even know the names of the gems they have used to decorate their palace!"

"You are my eldest son, born to my eldest wife," said Dhritarashtra. "Throw off jealousy! Yudhishthira isn't jealous of you. Why do you look covetously on your brother's possessions? The sons of Pandu are like my own arms—why are you so eager to lop them off? Learn the art of charity at rituals, learn how to satisfy your desires, enjoy the company of the palace ladies. Be content, my son."

"You speak so wisely, but nothing persuades me. The spoon does not taste of the food it takes to the mouth, and I do not get your meaning. Aren't we in this together, like two boats tied to each other? Don't you ever think of my interests? Success is what matters to a Kshatriya. Why are you so fastidious about duty? Like the charioteer whipping his steeds into a swift gallop, the clever man exploits all chances in order to achieve success. Who is my enemy? Not he who looks like one. My enemy is the man who hurts me. I don't think these doubts will disappear with time. Either I wrest the Pandavas' prosperity from them, or I die in the attempt."

Shakuni said, "Gambling is my bow, the dice my arrows, their markings my bowstring, the dice-board my chariot."

"Give Shakuni permission!" insisted Duryodhana.

"I must speak to Vidura first," said Dhritarashtra.

"Forget Vidura. He has sold himself to the Pandavas. You know what he thinks of us. Two heads are a headache; nothing gets done. A king riddled with doubt is like an insect sick with monsoon damp. Dice is an old game; what's wrong with it? Let the lucky man win!"

"I do not like the words you speak," said Dhritarashtra. "But do what you think is right. Remember there is always a price to pay for doing wrong."

Resigning himself to fate, and moved by the persuasion of his son, Dhritarashtra ordered the construction of a crystal-arched palace spread over an area of two square miles. Vidura protested, and Dhritarashtra continued to speak of a fate-controlled universe.

Vidura then took a fast chariot to the capital of the Pandavas, where Yudhishthira said to him, "You look worried, Vidura. What is the matter? Is the king happy, are his sons obedient?"

"Happy indeed he is, and well, and his sons are happy and well," replied Vidura. "He has asked me to invite you to Hastinapura to the new palace to play a friendly game of dice with his sons."

"Gambling leads to quarrelling," said Yudhishthira. "What is your opinion? We'll follow your advice."

"Well do I know that gambling leads to mischief, but I am sent here to invite you on orders from King Dhritarashtra."

"Who will be there playing against us besides the sons of the king?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Shakuni, King of Gandhara, who always plays for high stakes, Vivinshati, Satyavrata, Chitrasena, Purumitra and Jaya."

"A dishonest and desperate lot—but fate rules us at every step. How can I say no to the king's command? Tell me what to do. My heart is not in it, but if the cunning Shakuni throws me a challenge, I will not refuse," said Yudhishthira.

They set out with Draupadi for Hastinapura. Yudhishthira said before leaving:

"Like a shining particle blinding the eyes,
Fate dazzles us out of reason;
Like a doll swung by a thread,
Man follows his fate."

When they came and stood before Dhritarashtra, he smelt their heads in the traditional manner of greeting, and was glad. Lovely girls came to the guest chambers when they retired and sang them to sleep. The voices of poets chanting woke them in the hall, where the other kings were already gathered. Paying them respects, the Pandavas sat down on clean, luxuriously cushioned seats.

"We are all here," declared Shakuni. "Throw the opening dice and fix the rules."

"Gambling is wrong," said Yudhishthira. "It is not a Kshatriya game. Why are you so eager, Shakuni, to defeat us by devious means?"

"Let us begin," said Shakuni.

"Even in war we play fair. Even enemies deserve better than devious devices."

"Yudhishthira," said Shakuni, "when two people fight, the better man wins. The desire to defeat your opponent is always devious. A learned person debates with another in order to prove his point, which is also a devious thing. But are they therefore dishonest? My aim is to defeat you in a dice game—let's see who wins! Victory is the end. If you think that is deviousness on my part, leave, now."

"Challenged, I never retreat," replied Yudhishthira. "We are pawns in the hands of fate. Let us begin. Who plays against me?"

"I will supply the stakes," Duryodhana said. "My uncle Shakuni will play."

"Gambling by proxy is not in the rules," remarked Yudhishthira. "You know that. But never mind. If you insist, let Shakuni play for you."

Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the truthful Vidura sat sadly behind the two players.

"This pearl and gold necklace, churned from the legendary ocean, is my first stake. What is yours?"

"Many jewels, much wealth," replied Duryodhana, "They are yours. Try your luck."

The skilful Shakuni threw the dice and exclaimed, "I win."

"By an unfair throw," said Yudhishthira, "but let it pass. Let's play again. I stake everything in my treasury against yours. Throw!"

Again Shakuni won.

"I stake my royal chariot, covered with tiger-skin, fitted wtih flags and bells, and pulled by eight moonwhite horses."

Throwing unfairly, Shakuni shouted, "I win."

"I stake my slaves, a thousand young girls, richly dressed, wearing golden bracelets and necklaces, skilled in the sixtyfour arts, especially singing and dancing."

Again throwing unfairly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

"I stake all my silk-dressed servants."

Throwing unfairly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

"I stake one thousand golden-girdled cloud-coloured elephants, with tusks like ploughshares, bodies that batter down walls, each with six female elephants."

"I stake as many chariots as elephants, together with their horses, and their warriors who receive a thousand gold coins a month whether they fight or not."

"I win these too."

"I stake ten thousand chariots pulled by other animals, and six-thousand broad-chested soldiers."

Throwing unfairly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

While the game was in progress, Vidura turned to Dhritarashtra:

"Listen to me, sire, even if my words are bitter, like medicine to a dying man. When Duryodhana was born, he cried like a jackal. He will destroy us all. A jackal stalks our palace. Order Arjuna to kill him. Sacrifice a crow to get peacocks, sire; sell a jackal to buy tigers. Send Shakuni away: you know he is notorious for not playing fair."

"We know on whose side you are, Vidura," Duryodhana said. "You never liked us. We did not know we had a snake in our laps. I warn you: we have had enough of barking and biting! You are like an unchaste wife—go, leave us."

But Vidura again appealed to Dhritarashtra: "Wicked mouths make sweet speeches. Drink the bitter medicine of truth, O King. Drink it, and recover your senses. I am going, but look out for the hate-spitting cobra in your midst."

Shakuni asked, "What have your left now, Yudhishthira, that is not already ours?"

"Wealth? Is there any limit to mine?" replied Yudhishthira. "I stake all the trillions and quadrillions that I possess."

Throwing unfairly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

"I stake all my horses, cows, goats and sheep in the territory that lies between the Parvasha and the Sindhu rivers."

Throwing unfairly and quickly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

"I stake my capital, my kingdom, the wealth of all people in it except that of Brahmins."

Throwing unfairly, Shakuni exclaimed, "I win."

"I stake Nakula."

"I win."

"Sahadeva."

"Won!"

"Bhishma and Arjuna."

"Won! exclaimed Shakuni. "I thought you loved them dearly, Yudhishthira."

"You are a scoundrel to break up brothers like this," said Yudhishthira.

"People who lose their heads," remarked Shakuni, "blame others. You have lost everything, Yudhishthira. What is now left?"

"I am left," replied Yudhishthira "I stake myself."

"Won!" exclaimed Shakuni. "There is still Draupadi. Use her as a stake to win yourself back."

"The slender-waisted, wavy-haired Draupadi, fragrant as an autumn lotus, a woman of such grace and virtue that men thirst for such a wife . . . I stake her, Shakuni."

"Shame! Shame!" The assembled kings voiced their agitated disapproval. Vidura sat with his head between his hands, like a witless man, gazing at the ground and sighing like a snake. Karna and Duhshasana, laughed. There were tears in the eyes of others.

Shakuni, excited, picked up the dice and muttered, "Still left is Draupadi," and shouted, "Won!"

"Go, Vidura," said Duryodhana, "bring the beloved wife of the Pandavas here. Let her sweep our rooms, and stay with our maids."

Vidura returned: "You fool, don't you see you're deceiving yourself? Don't you see you're standing on the brink of doom?"

Arrogantly, Duryodhana turned to the door-keeper. "Go, bring Draupadi here. Let Vidura rave!"

The door-keeper ran and, like a dog slinking into a lion's cave, entered Draupadi's room.

"You have been won by Duryodhana in a dice game, my princess. Come with me."

"I . . . won!" exclaimed Draupadi. "Who stakes his wife in a dice game? Was there nothing else to stake?"

"First his brothers, then himself, then Yudhishthira staked you."

"Go back," ordered Draupadi. "Go back, and ask him who he staked first, himself or me. Report to me."

The messenger rushed back to the gambling hall, and spoke to Yudhishthira. "Sire, the princess Draupadi asks you: Who did you lose first—yourself or her?"

Yudhishthira, like a man out of his senses, sat still, and did not answer.

"Bring her here," ordered Duryodhana. "Let her put the question to him herself. Let us have the pleasure of listening to the conversation."

Carrying the meassage to Draupadi, the door-keeper said, "They order you to come there, my princess. These are evil days."

"It is the Creator's wish," said Draupadi. "But dharma will triumph. Go back and repeat my words to them. Tell the elders I am ready to do whatever they in their great wisdom think is consistent with dharma."

When the door-keeper repeated these words before them, they lowered their heads and were silent. Yudhishthira secretly sent a loyal messenger to her asking her to appear weeping before her father-in-law, dressed in a single piece of cloth and with her navel exposed (because she was in her period).

"Go," shouted Duryodhana at the door-keeper. "Bring her here."

Obedient to Duryodhana yet afraid of Draupadi, the door-keeper said, "What shall I tell her?"

"This fool is afraid of Bhima," shouted Duryodhana, and turned to Duhshasana "Go, and drag her here. These here are all our property. What can they do?"

The red-eyed Duhshasana rose and went to Draupadi's room. "You have been won by us, O Draupadi. Come, forget your modesty: accept Duryodhana. Accept us as your lords—you have been won fairly and you are now our property."

Draupadi ran her hands over her pale face, and rushed in distress to the ladies' quarters. Duhshasana, shouting, pursued her, and seized her by her long, dark-blue, wavy hair. He dragged her by her hair into the assembly; she was trembling like an plantain tree in a storm.

"Let me alone," she cried faintly. "I am in my period. I am dressed in a single cloth."

But he continued to drag her by her black hair while she prayed to Krishna to help her.

"In period or not, single cloth or naked, you have been won, and you are our slave."

Her hair dishevelled, and her dress slipping, she said softly but with anger: "Leave me alone! What will they say? There are elders and learned men in the hall. Look at my condition! To drag me in my period before a crowd of men . . . . It is shameful. Where is the dharma of the Kurus? Why are you all silent?"

She looked once witheringly in the direction of the Pandavas.

Noticing this, Duhshasana dragged her even harder, shouting "Slave!" and laughing. Karna laughed; and Shakuni and Duryodhana.

Bhishma spoke: "Dharma is a subtle thing. A man with no wealth cannot stake another's wealth. Can a wife be staked by her husband? Yudhishthira does not say that Shakuni cheated. Yudhishthira knows the difference between right and wrong. It is all very subtle."

"They cheated him," said Draupadi. "They knew he was a bad loser, and they tricked him."

Bhima said: "Even prostitutes are not staked by gamblers . . . . When you lost us, I did not say a word—you are our elder. But this is wrong, to stake Draupadi is wrong! How has she deserved this? I will set fire to your hands, the hands that lost her. Bring me fire, Sahadeva!"

"Have you lost your head, Bhima?" said Arjuna. "He is your eldest brother. They played fair, didn't they? He played of his own will, didn't he?"

"If you had not said that, Arjuna, I would have dragged him by his hands to a fire and burnt his hands in it."

Vikarna, one of Dhritarashtra's sons, addressed the assembly: "The princess Draupadi has spoken in front of you. Bhishma and Kripa, our gurus, are silent. Even Vidura does not say a word. Tell me, O kings, what is your mind. On whose side are you?"

He rubbed his hands together and sighed like a snake. No one answered.

"Listen to me then, for I will speak as my conscience dictates. Hunting, drinking, gambling, and whoring are the four vices of kings. Under their influence, kings do irresponsible deeds. Yudhishthira staked Draupadi in a gambling fit. She is not his wife only, but of four others. He lost himself first before losing her. My conclusion is that she is neither morally nor legally won."

But Karna, gesticulating wildly with his strong arms, retorted: "Not so fast, Vikarna! The other kings don't seem to object. Is Draupadi Yudhishthira's possession, or isn't she? Do you think it's against dharma to bring her here dressed in a single cloth? Listen then. The gods allow one wife to a man. But Draupadi has five husbands. What sort of dharma is that? Even stripping a woman like her should not shock anyone. We have won everything the Pandavas have, haven't we? and won it fairly, haven't we? Well, take off their clothes—and strip her too!"

In front of everyone, Duhshasana seized one end of Draupadi's dress and began to pull it off her person. She cried loudly, "O Krishna! Soul of the universe! Creator of all life! Help me!" She covered her beautiful face with her hands. Krishna, hearing her cries, hurried to the gambling hall on foot. And even as she prayed for Krishna's help, the god Dharma reclothed her in multicoloured dresses. As one dress was pulled off, another appeared in its place, until the floor was littered with hundreds of many-coloured pieces of cloth. All the kings applauded.

Bhima rose, clenching his fists and, trembling in anger, made a terrible vow.

"Listen to my oath, O Kshatriya kings of the world! If I fail to keep it, may I lose the heaven of my ancestors! I will in battle rip open the breast of Duhshasana with my bare hands and drink his blood!"

Duhshasana, tired and ashamed, sat down, surrounded by a heap of Draupadi's dresses.

Then the wise Vidura said, "The question of Draupadi remains unanswered. Let us ponder deeply, O kings, and give it an answer in accordance with the dictates of dharma."

But no one spoke; and Karna, turning to Duhshasana, said, "Take this slave girl Draupadi to the inner quarters."

"Wait!" said Draupadi, as Duhshasana began to drag her. "I have forgotten a noble duty. Revered and wise elders, I pay you my respects. Forgive me for not paying them when I was brought in."

Duhshasana dragged her; she fell, and said, "The times have indeed changed, O noble kings. I, the wife of Yudhishthira, am now a servant maid. Tell me if you think it right. Your words are full of wisdom."

Bhishma replied, "Have I not said already that the ways of dharma are subtle? Even the wisest are baffled sometimes. I do not know. Ask Yudhishthira. He will know if you were won or not."

"Well," said Duryodhana, "answer it—is she ours or not?" He uncovered his left thigh, which was shaped like a plantain tree, like an elephant's trunk, and graced with auspicious marks, and showed it to Draupadi.

Bhima's red eyes dilated, and he shouted: "That is the thigh I will smash with my own hands in the great war!" Anger crackled from him like sparks from a blazing tree.

Vidura addressed the assembly: "When Bhima makes a vow, O kings, there is danger ahead. If Yudhishthira had staked her before he was himself won, the game would stand. But how can a person already lost stake and lose another?"

Duryodhana said: "If Bhima, Arjuna, and the twins declare Yudhishthira is not their master, I shall free Draupadi."

"He was our master before and during the game," Arjuna said. "I do not know whose master he was after he lost himself."

A jackal howled in the puja room of the palace. Asses brayed. Birds shrieked. Knowing these to be fearful omens, Vidura spoke to the king, and Dhritarashtra said: "When you insulted the wife of a relative, Duryodhana, ruin overtook you."

He turned to Draupadi. "Chaste and virtuous Draupadi, first among my daughters-in-law, ask me any boon."

"Let Yudhishthira be freed," said Draupadi. "Let no one say my son Prativindhya was the son of a slave."

"It will be done. Ask another boon," said Dhritarashtra.

"Free Bhima and Arjuna and the twins, and restore to them their bows and chariots."

"Ask a third," said Dhritarashtra.

"That would be too much," Draupadi said. "I do not deserve a third boon. It is said that a Vaishya may ask one boon, a Kshatriya lady two boons, a Kshatriya warrior three, and a Brahmin a hundred. They are now free—they will find prosperity without my help."

"Never have we heard of such selflessness," said Karna. "She has rowed the drowning Pandavas to safety."

Bhima looked around fiercely, but Arjuna pacified him. "Good men remember good, and forgive wrong. Revenge does not go with self-respect."

Yudhishthira came forward and held Bhima's arms. "Enough, Bhima!" He approached Dhritarashtra with folded palms.

"Command us, sire."

"Go in peace," said Dhitarashtra. "The axe chooses wood, not stone. I speak to you because you are open to advice; Duryodhana isn't. Only the worst in men is brought out by quarrels. The good do good to others without expecting good to be done to them. Look at me, Yudhishthira, I am old and blind. I allowed the dice game because I wished to see the virtues and defects of my children. And I now know that you are virtuous, Arjuna is patient, Bhima brave, and the twins loyal. Go back to Indraprastha, and live in peace with your cousins. Cultivate virtue."

Cheerfully the brothers prepared to return to their capital.

But Duryodhana, Shakuni and Karna conspired, and approached Dhritarashtra with sweet and cunning words.

"Remember Brihaspati's words: Kill your enemies by any means at your disposal. The Pandavas will destroy us if they go free. Look at Arjuna, lifting his divine bow and casting hostile glances at us Do you think they will ever forgive the insult to Draupadi? Allow us one more dice game, the bet this time being forest exile for twelve years, the thirteenth year to be spent unknown in a kingdom. Let's play once more! Even if the Pandavas survive the exile, we'll have a large army waiting to defeat them on their return."

"Call them back," ordered Dhritarashtra.

Drona, Vidura and others protested, but the fond king turned down their advice.

When the royal messenger informed Yudhishthira of the king's new decision, Yudhishthira said, "Such is fate. I know I will lose, but I cannot refuse the king." Saying which, he returned to the gambling hall and sat down to play.

Shakuni explained the bet, adding that if the exiles were recognized in the thirteenth year, they must go for an additional twelve-year exile as penalty, and that their kingdom would be returned to the exiles if the thirteen years were successfully completed. "Let us play."

Yudhishthira agreed to the conditions. Shakuni cast the dice, and said to Yudhishthira, "I win."

The Pandavas began preparing at once for their long exile. They discarded their royal robes and put on deer-skins. Duhshasana exclaimed: "Now begins the unchallenged supremacy of Duryodhana. The Pandavas are finished! Draupadi has eunuchs for husbands!"

Bhima strode toward him like a Himalayan lion toward a jackal. "Villainous swine! I promise you I shall pierce your heart in battle! And the others who now follow you—I shall pack them off to the land of the dead."

Duhshasana saw Bhima strutting helplessly, and loudly said: "Cow! Cow!"

As the Pandavas moved out of the hall, Duryodhana mimicked the majestic walk of Bhima, who turned and said:

"I will kill Duryodhana with my mace, and crush his head underfoot. Arjuna will kill Karna, and Sahadeva will kill Shakuni. And like a lion I will drink Duhshasana's blood!"

Then Yudhishthira said: "To all I bid farewell—to Bhishma, Drona, Vidura, Kripa, Dhritarashtra and his sons, Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and the courtiers. I bid you farewell . . . but I shall return."

Draupadi went to Kunti to receive her blessings. "Go safely, my daughter," said Kunti. Dressed in a bloodstained single piece of cloth, hair dishevelled, the weeping Draupadi left her mother-in-law.

Immediately anxiety overcame Dhritarashtra, and he summoned Vidura. "Tell me about them. How did they leave?"

"Yudhishthira left covering his face," replied Vidura. "Bhima flexed his arms, Sahadeva smeared his face, not wanting to be recognized. Nakula covered himself with dust. And Draupadi went in her bloodstained dress, weeping. The citizens followed them in loud lament."

The Third Book:
The Forest

The Pandavas took the road north, followed by the sorrowing and murmuring citizens. "Why do you leave us, we who loved you? What shall we do without you to guide us?"

"We are fortunate," said Yudhishthira, "in having the love of the citizens. But we ask you to return, and to be loyal to our grandfather Bhishma, the King, Vidura, and my mother, who too are stricken with sorrow. Do not waste pity on us You have come far enough."

"Alas!" moaned the citizens. "Alas, O King."

The citizens retraced their steps, and the Pandavas drove their chariots to the giant banyan called Pramana on the banks of the Ganga, where they purified themselves by touching the sacred water, and spent the night.

But Yudhishthira next morning was afflicted with remorse. "How can I look you straight in the eyes, who out of love suffer for my mistakes?" Tears came to his eyes. A wise Brahmin, Saunaka, skilled in Samkhya Yoga, consoled him:

"Grief and fear strike daily,
They strike only the foolish, never the wise,
Never a man like you, gifted with the eight qualities.
Disease, effort, greed, and contact with pain-producing objects—
These cause suffering.
There are drugs to cure disease, and yoga curbs greed,
Sweet words and sweet objects do the rest.
Like a red-hot steel rod thrust in water,
The restless mind sticks itself in the body.
Like water quenching fire, knowledge cools the mind.
The mind at peace, the body relaxes also.
Desire is the root!
For desire breeds love of worldly things,
Desire breeds fear.
As a little fire pushed in a tree trunk
Moving, consumes the roots,
Desire, however little, grows, devouring dharma.
The runner away is not the renouncer,
But he who stays in the world with clear vision.
Desire neither friends nor wealth,
Desire not even yourself.

Knowledge is the great extinguisher.
Knowledge is the lotus-leaf, unstained by slime.
Terrible is the thirst of desire,
A worm in the heart.
Like a flaming log consuming itself,
Desire consumes the soul.
Like life dreading death,
Wealth dreads king, thief, water, fire, and relatives;
Like food devoured in air by birds,
On the ground by beasts, in water by fish,
Wealth is devoured by fate.
Like the light-loving moth falling in flame,
Man falls into temptation, moved by desire.
And he rolls like a wheel, endlessly rolling,
A wanderer from one birth to another,
Ignorant of himself, searching for himself
Now in Brahma, now in a grass blade,
Now in water, now on land, now in the air."

With the Pandavas gone, Dhritarashtra sadly summoned Vidura, and asked: "What do we do now?"

"Artha, Kama and Moksha are the three pillars of a kingdom," said Vidura. "Did I not say when Duryodhana was born, *Cast him away. He will bring us ruin.* But you would not listen. Let Duryodhana, Shakuni and Karna implore the Pandavas to return. And ask Duhshasana to beg forgiveness of Bhima and Draupadi in the open court. That is my advice; but use your wisdom."

"You speak only for the Pandavas, Vidura," said Dhritarashtra, "and I do not find myself in agreement with you. Do you expect me to abandon my son for the sake of the sons of Pandu? They are my sons, too; but Duryodhana is my own flesh and blood. I love you, Vidura, but you do not give me straight advice in this matter. Stay if you like—or leave me, like an unfaithful wife her husband."

Muttering, "This house is doomed," Vidura went to meet the Pandavas.

From the banks of the Ganga, the Pandavas moved to the land of Kurukshetra, bathed in the Yamuna and Sarasvati, and travelled to the western forests, where they lived, among birds and deer and ascetics. Here Vidura found Yudhishthira sitting with Draupadi in a secluded part of the forest, in the company of his brothers and a few Brahmins.

"Like medicine an ill man, my advice displeases the King," said Vidura. "I failed to convince him. He looks at me like a young bride at a husband of sixty. The race is ruined, doom is certain!"

After Vidura had left, Dhritarashtra repented and fell down unconscious. Regaining his senses, he called Sanjaya. "Bring my brother back. He is like the god Dharma himself." He wept bitterly.

When Vidura returned, Dhritarashtra took him by his side and smelt his forehead. "Forgive me, Vidura, I spoke very harsh words to you."

"You are my elder," said Vidura. "You are always forgiven. I love your son too, sire, but my heart went out to the Pandavas in their distress."

Learning of Vidura's return, Duryodhana began to chafe. He told Shakuni, Karna and Duhshasana, "Vidura has gone over to the Pandavas. Should they return, I'll fast or poison myself. I'll commit suicide rather than see them restored to authority."

"Why do you worry?" said Shakuni. "They have given their word to stay in exile. All we need do is keep an eye on them."

"And if they should return," Karna added, "there's always another dice game."

Duryodhana moved his face away. "Perhaps we should go and overtake them, and kill them now, and put an end to the problem," Karna said.

"Good!" the others shouted, and rushed to their chariots. But Vyasa, getting to know their intentions by his divine vision, appeared and ordered them back; after which he went to Dhritarashtra,

"I come accompanied by the sage Maitreya, who has been with the Pandavas very recently," said Vyasa. "Order your son to listen to his advice, or face the threat of a terrible curse."

Maitreya turned to Duryodhana and said softly, "What I say is for your good. The Pandavas are powerful warriors—they have already slain the rakshasas led by Hidimba and Kirmira. Jarasandha was killed by Bhima. It is folly to be their enemy. Make peace with them."

Duryodhana slapped his splendid thigh, smiled made patterns on the ground with his foot, and was silent.

His eyes red with anger, Maitreya touched water, and cursed Duryodhana: "May the bitter fruits of insolence fall on your head! When the great war comes, Bhima's mace will smash your thigh into pulp."

Dhritarashtra tried to pacify the sage, but Maitreya said, "The curse remains unless peace is made with the Pandavas."

"Maitreya," said Dhritarashtra, "tell us how Bhima slew the rakshasa Kirmira."

"Ask Vidura," said Maitreya. "I will not speak a word with you until peace is made with the Pandavas."

Learning of the Pandavas' exile, various tribes—the Vrishnis, Bhojas, and Andhakas—and the Kaikeya brothers and Draupadi's relatives, visited them in the forest. With Krishna at their head, they sat around Yudhishthira. "Let us unite and restore Yudhishthira to his throne,". said Krishna, and spoke at length on the crimes of Dhritarashtra's sons.

Lotus-eyed Draupadi appeared and addressed Krishna, "The sages say you are the one and only Prajapati, the creator of the universe. You are Vishnu and Shiva: the three worlds are your womb and ,you the lord of all.

"O Krishna, they dragged me, the sister of Dhrishtadyumna, the wife of the Pandavas, during my period, stained with blood, dressed in a single cloth—they dragged me in front of all the kings—and the sons of Dhritarashtra laughed at me! They wanted to make me their slave by force! And my husbands sat through it, unmoving! Shame on Bhima, shame on Arjuna! Dosen't dharma say a husband should protect his wife's honour? Others they protect—me they couldn't!

"Have I not given them five sons? And don't I deserve protection at least on that account? Shame on Arjuna's magic bow, that slept while I was dragged in my period through the hall. Shame on Bhima's strength! Poison he could drink, serpents he could kill, Kunti he could save from the burning lacquer house, but me he could not protect! I was seized by my hair, Krishna, while the Pandavas watched, the brave Indras, my own husbands!"

Her tears fell on her gracefully-rounded breasts; she sighed, wiping her eyes, and continued bitterly: "I have neither husbands, nor sons, nor friends, nor father. I do not even have you, O Krishna, for you also are silent. Are there not four reasons for you to protect me?—are we not related? don't you respect me? are we not friends? are you not my lord?"

Krishna replied: "Just as you weep now, fair lady, so will weep the wives of those who made you angry, when they see their husbands dead, pierced with arrows. I will do all I can for the Pandavas—I give you my word."

Draupadi cast a side glance at Arjuna.

"It will indeed be as he says," remarked Arjuna. "Lovely-eyed wife, it cannot be otherwise."

Dhristadyumna added: "I will kill Drona, Shikhandin will kill Bhishma. I promise you this, my sister. With Krishna to help us, we are invincible."

"All this would never have happened if I hadn't been away in Dvaraka," said Krishna to Yudhishthira. "I would have revealed to you all the evils of gambling. I would have shown you how dice becomes an obsession . . . .As it is, I was attacking the city of King Shalva, where I killed Damaghosha, the son of Sishupala, because he insulted me at the Rajasuya ritual. In my absence, hearing that Damaghosha had been killed, Shalva invaded my capital Dvaraka, and slaughtered many young heroes. 'Where is the swine Krishna,' he kept shouting, 'the killer of my brother Sishupala? Where is the brave Krishna who slew my unprepared boy of a brother, and not even on a field of battle?' Abusing me in this manner, he left, but I pursued him and cornered him on an island. It was then that I was brought news of the dice game, and I immediately rushed to Hastinapura."

Honoured by Yudhishthira and Bhima, embraced by Arjuna, saluted by the twins, and tearfully worshipped by Draupadi, Krishna mounted his golden chariot and left with Subhadra and Abhimanyu.

"Twelve years in these forests," Yudhishthira said to his brothers, "twelve years of loneliness. But let us pick a lovely spot where birds, deer, flower and fruit are, where holy men visit, and let us make it our home. Let us go to the sacred lake Dvaitavana."

They dwelt in the sacred woods of Dvaita,
Full of flowering palm, mango, and *karnikara*,

Where peacocks, *chakoras* and kokilas sang,
Pouring forth sweetness from the tallest tress,
Where hill-huge elephants, wet with rutting juice,
Passed by;
Where matted-haired ascetics,
Clad in tree-bark, silently contemplated.
Like Indra in heaven were the Pandavas in that forest.

To the forest every day flocked Brahmins, chanting from the Vedas, the Yajur, Rig, and Sama.

"What is a Kahatriya without a Brahmin," said the sage Vaka one evening to Yudhishthira in the presence of other Brahmins, "but an elephant without a driver? When a Brahmin and a Kshatriya join hands, even the earth bows. Always have a Brahmin to advise you, O Yudhishthira, and your fame will spread in the three worlds. It is well known that you respect Brahmins highly."

Another evening Draupadi said to Yudhishthira: "Do you remember, my husband, that only Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Duhshasana showed no sorrow when we left? All the others shed tears. Are you not moved to anger seeing young Nakula exiled? Can you forgive those who insulted Sahadeva? What about me? Has all feeling deserted you? Are you a Kshatriya or not? Is a Kshatriya ever expected to forgive his enemies? Kill them. Do it now! This isn't the time for forgiveness. The soft man is pushed aside; the fierce one prevails. You have been soft too long; learn to be fierce now."

Yudhishthira replied:

"True, passion destroys some, and helps others.
But anger suppressed is the highest success,
Anger indulged is the father of ruin.
Draupadi, my beautiful wife,
Anger is pure waste, anger is loss of heaven.
How will the world run
If bitterness rewards bitterness,
Injury is returned for injury, hate for hate,
If fathers suspect sons, sons suspect fathers,
If trust disappears between husband and wife?
Forgiveness is the only virtue,

Forgiveness is sacrifice, forgiveness is the Vedas,
Forgiveness is our tradition;
Forgiveness is Brahma, forgiveness is truth,
Forgiveness is penance, forgiveness is holiness,
Forgiveness holds the world together.
Do not argue me away from forgiveness, my wife,
Forgiveness and gentleness are the virtues of the wise."

"Whatever you say about dharma must be true," remarked Draupadi. "I know that dharma, protected, protects, that for the sake of preserving dharma Arjuna, Bhima and all of us may be sacrificed. But I do not see dharma being specially kind to you, my husband, though you have performed the Ashvamedha and the Rajasuya, the Cow Sacrifice and the Elephant Sacrifice. Was it dharma that made you lose all of us at the dice game? Was it dharma that drove a simple, kind, modest and truthful person like you to the dice game? I do not know what I am saying . . . . Perhaps it is all the work of fate. Like a pearl on a string, like a bull led by the cord through its nose, like a tree falling from the bank into a flowing stream, man follows the will of the Creator. And the Creator plays with us, like a child playing with a clay toy, now mean, now loving. Why do the good suffer, why do the wicked prosper? Why is vicious Duryodhana prospering? If it is God's will that this be so, then guilt attaches to God too. If man is free to do as he likes, why is he free to do so much wrong and so little good?"

"How pleasing are your sentences, Draupadi," said Yudhishthira, "how charmingly constructed, how persuasive. Yet how cynical. I do not act thinking of rewards, my wife—I give because it is my duty to give, I perform sacrifices because I feel it is my duty to do so. I admire good men, so I try to be good myself. The man who has an eye on the fruit of action, does business in dharma. How can he be called virtuous? Nor does cynicism help, for it corrodes action at the start, and aborts virtuous benefits. Like a ship to merchants wishing to cross the ocean, virtue is a ferry to heaven. If rituals, celibacy, charity, honesty and study of the scriptures are useless, why does generation after generation continue to cherish and practise them? Even the gods, rakshasas, sages and gandharvas cherish dharma. It is a mystery why virtuous acts should sometimes be fruitless: there are some things man cannot explain."

"It was not my intention to run down dharma," said Draupadi. "Why should I disparage the Creator? Great grief makes me incoherent—but listen to me once again, please. What is life without action? Let action be your virtue. Like the unfired clay pot in water, the lazy man is dissolved in life; he is nothing. Oil comes from sesame seeds, curds from milk, and virtue from right action. Doesn't Manu the lawgiver preach action? Without action, where is success? The shrewd man knows his enemy, and takes steps to subdue him. I repeat all this, my husband, as I heard it from a learned Brahmin who was my father's counsellor; I would sit on my father's lap, and listen to the sweet truths that flowed from his lips."

Bhima sighed and said: "What do we gain by living in exile? Duryodhana took our kingdom away by cheating, like a dung-eating jackal stealing from a lion. What's a promise, broken or kept? Dharma practised for the sake of dharma always brings suffering; he's a fool who doesn't know what dharma is for. Clever men know how to bribe, like fowlers tempting birds with scraps of meat. Others have other ways. Why don't we use force and wrest our kingdom back?"

Yudhishthira listened patiently; then he spoke, slowly. "What you say is true. And I do not complain though your words are like arrows. Only my folly is responsible for your exile. Why should I blame you, Bhima, for the language you use? I blame the workings of fate. But this I repeat: dharma is greater than life itself. A kingdom, sons, glory, and wealth do not add up to even a sixteenth part of dharma."

"Short is life, my brother," said Bhima. "Like froth on the ocean, like fruit falling, we live in time, whose stream takes us all away, even taking away death. Each time the eye pencil picks up a grain, the quantity of collyrium decreases. If we waste thirteen years in the forest, we are thirteen years closer to death. How can you counsel patience? Act now! Let us be Kshatriyas. Let us kill them."

But Yudhishthira insisted on patience; and after some time, recalling the words of Vyasa, he called Arjuna to him in private. He took Arjuna's hands in his, smiled, and said gently: "You know, Arjuna, that Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Kripa between them know all that there is to know about the use of weapons, whether of attack or defence. Because I have great hopes in you, I will give you the mantra revealed to me by Vyasa in order that you may obtain the favour of the gods. Practise fierce asceticism, Arjuna. Take your bow and sword, and go north dressed in armour. Let nothing stop you. Indra has all the divine weapons put in his trust by the gods. Go to him: he will give them to you."

Draupadi said to him as he was about to depart: "May Kunti's wish be accomplished! May we never be born Kshatriyas again. May the spirits of the earth, the sky and heaven protect you on your journey."

Crossing many dangerous territories, Arjuna reached the world of Indra in the sacred Himalayas. A voice from the skies shouted. He looked around quickly, and saw in front of him, sitting under a tree, a rust-coloured, matted-haired holy man, from whose body light flashed out.

"Why all the armour, my child? he asked. "You will not need the weapons of war here. Throw them away."

But Arjuna stood firm.

"Well," said the Brahmin, pleased. "I am Indra. Ask your boon."

Arjuna bowed and folded his hands before the thousand-eyed god. "Teach me the use of all the weapons."

"You come to the wrong place. You do not need the weapons of war here. Ask for heaven instead."

"I am not interested in becoming a god, and I am not interested in heaven. My brothers are waiting for me—how can I shamelessly leave them behind?" said Arjuna.

"Very well," said Indra. "You will get the divine weapons when you see the three-eyed, trident-carrying Shiva. Till then, do as you like." Saying which, Indra disappeared, and Arjuna remained where he was, practising the fiercest asceticism for a glimpse of Shiva.

When the vision was granted and the weapons obtained, Arjuna went to the city of Indra. A city of perennial flowers and sacred trees, and the garden called the Nandana, where apsaras sported, a garden for the virtuous. None entered it who mocked ritual, or were mean, or drank immoderately, or ate impure meat, or slept with their gurus' wives.

Humbly Arjuna bent his head before Indra, who first made him sit on the edge of his resplendent throne, and then sat him on his lap. Arjuna blazed in glory like a second Indra. Affectionately Indra ran his fragrant hands over Arjuna's face, and smiled to see his son, yet did not appear to smile. The more he looked, the more it delighted him to look. Father and son shone, like the sun and moon on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight. The Gandharvas sang songs. The lotus-eyed, sage-seducing apsaras, among them Menaka, Gopali, and Urvashi, danced. Slim-waisted and large-hipped, they shook their large breasts as they moved, casting amorous glances at the spectators.

All the weapons were collected, including the thunderbolt of Indra, and Arjuna, at his father's command, spent five years in heaven, enjoying all manner of luxurious pleasures.

Meanwhile Indra had noticed Arjuna's interest in Urvashi, and he said privately to the king of the Gandharvas, Chitrasena: "Go to Urvashi, the best of the apsaras, and tell her, because Arjuna has skilled himself in all the arts of war, I wish her to instruct him now in the subtleties of love."

Chitrasena smiled at the reclining Urvashi. "You have heard of Arjuna, graceful, handsome, and disciplined; quickwitted, brave, and virtuous; respectful, modest, and discriminating; truthful, eloquent, faithful, and admired. O Urvashi, Indra commands that he be given a taste of the joys of heaven. Arjuna loves you—give him your favour."

Urvashi smiled. "How can I help loving a man with such a list of virtues!"

She rose, bathed, and adorned herself with ornaments and divinely-scented garlands. In her imagination she dreamed of Arjuna lying with her in a bed covered with celestial sheets.

In the deepening twilight and early moonrise, she left for Arjuna's house.

In her soft braids were clusters of flowers;
Delicate eye gestures and a moon-rivalling face.
As she walked, her full sandal-scented breasts,
Finely curved, supporting a gold necklace,
Trembled;

The weight of her breasts bent her three-fold waist,
She stooped at every step;
Lovely her loins, abode of Kamadeva,
High and round her hips, hill-shaped her lower region,
Adorned with gold chains,—
Sensuous seduction for a saint;
Her feet flat-soled,
Her toes copper-bright and curved like tortoise shells,
Tinkling with little bells;
Her breath slightly heady with wine and desire;
Her dress a fine and filmy cloth,
Through which glowed her body like the moon through cloud.

Reaching Arjuna's palace, she sent word by messenger and entered. Arjuna, embarrassed, came out to welcome her, and, seeing her, modestly closed his eyes, offering her the deference generally reserved for a superior. "Look upon me as your servant, O Urvashi."

Flattered, she repeated to him all that Chitrasena had told her. "When I danced, Arjuna, you had eyes for me only. Your virtues have fascinated my heart, and I am in love with you. I come here to serve your pleasure."

Arjuna covered his ears with his hands. "But you are an apsara of heaven. You are my superior, lovely lady. You are like Kunti to me, like Indra's Queen Shashi. True, I had eyes for you only when you danced. But with reason, for I said to myself: *This lovely girl is the mother of the Puru race.* You are the parent of my race: it is not right that you have any but motherly feelings for me."

"I am an apsara, Arjuna," she replied. "I enjoy complete freedom. Many sons and grandsons of the Puru race have indeed enjoyed me, but without blame. Do not send me away. I love you. Take me."

"Urvashi, listen to me! You are to me like Kunti and Shashi, you are a woman I honour. You are like my mother to me; look upon me as your son. I prostrate myself at your feet."

Anger suffused her; she shook her head, her brows contracted, and she cursed him. "Because you reject a girl who comes to you commanded by your father and also out of her own love for you, a woman stricken with love—for this insult, Arjuna, you will pass your days unwanted by women, and impotent, mocked as a eunuch."

Her lips still quivering, her whole body trembling, she returned to her house. Arjuna went to Chitrasena and narrated the incident to him, repeatedly referring to the curse. Chitrasena reported it to Indra himself. Indra called Arjuna and said:

"Blessed is the mother of such a disciplined son. Even the sages are humbled by your performance. Do not worry, Arjuna: the curse will be of help to you in the thirteenth year of your exile. You will then spend one year as a eunuch dancer, before returning to normal."

While Arjuna was with Indra, the Pandavas passed their time in the forest of Kamyaka. Arjuna's absence troubled them often, and when the sage Brihadashva paid them a visit, Yudhishthira grieved before him:

"Is there a king more unfortunate than I? Has anyone heard of such misfortune as mine? I am the most wretched of men."

Brihadashva narrated the story of Nala and Damayanti to him, saying, when he finished:

"What is the point in grieving? The story of Nala's misfortunes drives away others' misfortunes. As for the other fear you live with—your lack of skill in dice—I will teach you all there is to know about the game."

Imparting knowledge of the science of gambling to Yudhishthira, he left.

From other Brahmins and travellers Yudhishthira learnt that Arjuna was still engaged in the practice of severe asceticism, living sometimes only on air. "Without him," he thought, "nothing pleases. Without the blue-skinned Arjuna, even the loveliness of the Kamyaka forest fades."

"Let us leave this forest," said Sahadeva, "and migrate to another."

Accompanied by Brahmins, they set out to see the holy places of pilgrimage, visiting many mountains, rivers, towns, and forests, dipping their hands in many sacred waters, till they came to the source of the Ganga, the sacred river Alakananda, whose descent Shiva received in his matted hair. Here they worshipped, and resumed their journey.

Exhausted because she was unused to travel on foot, Draupadi collapsed after the second mile; her lovely thighs pressed against each other for support, she leaned, and fell down. Seeing her sway like a creeper, Nakula ran to help her. The others rushed to her side. "She was used to fine beds in luxurious rooms in our palace. Now, because of my folly, she lies prostrate on the ground, her soft feet and lotus face dark-blue with strain."

Revived by the fanning of palm leaves and moisture-laden breezes, Draupadi opened her eyes. They rested her on a deer-skin, and the twins began massaging her henna-decorated feet with their bowstring-scarred hands.

"There are still many mountains ahead of us," said Yudhishthira to Bhima. "How will she manage?"

"I will carry you, the twins, and Draupadi on my back, if you like," replied Bhima. "Or, better still, if you allow me, I will summon the mighty Ghatotkacha and his rakshasas to carry us all."

No sooner had Bhima thought of his son than Ghatotkacha appeared before him, and picked up Draupadi while the other rakshasas carried the Pandava brothers. In this way they passed through many territories, saw the holy mountain Kailasa, beside which was the ashrama of Brahma, where celestial flowers and fruits blossomed.

Here they saw the round-trunked jujube,
Fresh, thickly-shaded, and salubrious,
Giant-boughed, wide-spreading, and lustrous,
Flowering with delicious honey-dripping fruit.

Delighted, they lived there for six nights, happy because Draupadi was happy, and waiting for Arjuna to return.

On the sixth day a wind blew from the north-east,
Bringing a sun-bright, thousand-petalled lotus.
Draupadi saw it on the ground,
Excellently fragrant.
    "Look, Bhima, look
At this magical lotus, source of all fragrance.
I shall give it to Yudhishthira.

Get me some more."
        Eager to please her,
Bhima went hastily north, pushing against the wind,
Like a lion enraged, or a rutting elephant,
Carrying his gold-worked bow and snake-fierce arrows,
Fearless, unwearied, and single-minded.
Climbing the mountain, he reached the high slopes
Rich with lush vegetation.
        On he moved,
His ears filled with the songs of male kokilas
And the hum of bees, his face fanned by lotus perfumes
Gentle as a father's caress.
    He brushed past the seven-leaved tree.
With clouds on its sides, the mountain danced,
Necklaces of pearls were its murmuring rivulets;
Waterfalls fell, like filmy dresses unfastened;
Peacocks strutted to the music of apsaras' bangles;
Cheerfully he ranged through networks of creepers,
Watched by the fearless grass-chewing deer,
Watched also by yakshas and gandharvas,
Sitting unseen with their husbands on the mountain,
Enamoured of his golden body, his lion gait,
His fierce eyes;
        and he thought to himself,
"I must get the flowers soon, before the twins come searching."
So he moved fast, and the ground trembled,
The elephants panicked, crushing lion, deer, and tiger;
Uprooted and smashed were the trees, creepers ravaged,
As Bhima like a thundercloud moved up the mountain.
He tore up plantain trees and flung them from him,
While the beasts howled, and wet-winged birds flew up.
Then he saw the lake:
        a lake of lotus and lily,
Surrounded by swaying plantain trees.
Plunging in, he played in the water;
        then moved on.
He blew his conch shell and slapped his arms;
He shouted;
        and the caves roared,

The lions roared, and the elephants trumpeted.

Hanuman, hearing the noise, knowing Bhima to be his brother, lay on the narrow path, blocking it for the safety of Bhima. He yawned, and flicked his long tail, resembling the sacrificial pole of Indra, like a whip lash. The noise reverbrated through the mountains and the long-haired tail uprose like a banner. Bhima saw Hanuman's small lips, red ears, copper face and tongue, quick eyes, and the sharp teeth. He lay across the path like a sleeping flame. Bhima shouted. The birds and beasts stood still, terrified.

Hanuman turned gently, opened half a pink eye, and said, "I am ill and resting. Why do you disturb me? Monkey I might be, but I can do with some respect."

"I am a Kshatriya, my name is Bhima. Who are you?"

"I am a monkey who likes to lie in your path. It is healthier for you to go back."

"You are proud, monkey," said Bhima. "I am good at teaching lessons."

"I am ill," said Hanuman. "Go away. Or if you can, jump over me."

"Jump over you?" said Bhima. "Are you mad? Insult a sleeping soul? Jump like Hanuman over the ocean? Never."

"Who's Hanuman?"

"My brother, son of the wind god, the monkey in the *Ramayana*," replied Bhima. "My strength is like his. So get up. Fight!"

"I am the wind god's son too, and my name is Hanuman."

"My brother!" exclaimed Bhima, clasping Hanuman lovingly. "I am fortunate to be so favoured. Show me your admirable body that I may know for certain."

Bhima marvelled seeing the awesome body; and when Hanuman left, he resumed his search for the thousand-petalled lotus.

Near the Kailasa mountain lay the lovely lake,
Wood-fringed and guarded by rakshasas,
Filled with golden lotuses and green lilies.

"Who are you?" enquired the rakshasas. "You come dressed as an ascetic, yet fully armed."

"My name is Bhima. I am the son of Pandu. I come to take the thousand-petalled lotus, which pleased my wife Draupadi."

"But this is the world of Kubera, the god of wealth," they said. "Mortals subject to death cannot come alive here. Take his permission first before you take the lotus."

"I do not see Kubera here," said Bhima. "And I am a Kshatriya. I do not run to people to get their permission. This lake is made by a waterfall. It is nature's free gift. Why should I ask him first?"

Saying this, he jumped into the lake. "Don't! Don't!" the rakshasas shouted, but he swam further in. They rushed at him, shrieking, "Capture him!" "Kill him!" "Eat him!" But he fought back and killed a hundred of them, strewing their bodies beside the lake; and the rest fled.

He drank the sweet waters.
He plucked the thousand-petalled lotuses.
Kubera smiled, and Bhima played.

At that time a fierce wind rose; and meteors shot across the heavens. Dust blotted out the wan sun; the points of the heavens reddened; birds and beasts wailed in the all-covering darkness.

"Where is Bhima?" Yudhishthira asked Draupadi. "Fighting somewhere? Look at the terrible omens."

"He's searching for the thousand-petalled lotus to give to me." Draupadi replied.

"Let us go and find him."

They came upon Bhima angrily splashing, with his mace uplifted, in the lotus-lovely lake, around him bodies of rakshasas and yakshas with arms, thighs, and heads crushed; looking like the god of death at the dissolution of the world.

"What have you done, Bhima?" rebuked Yudhishthira. "Never offend the gods again without asking me." He pacified the lake's guardians; and the Pandavas lived happily beside the lake for some days, on the slope of the fragrant mountain.

One day, without warning, a rakshasa, Jatasura, disguised as one of the Brahmins accompanying the brothers, carried off Yudhishthira. His plans were also to rape Draupadi and steal the remarkable weapons of war.

"Stupid fool," said Yudhishthira, "don't you see your merit decreases by this act? Why do you upset the balance of dharma? Dharma governs rakshasas most of all."

Sahadeva caught up with Jatasura after a hot chase, and shouted:

"Rakshasa, stop! You die before sunset today, or I am not a Kshatriya. I am Pandu's son, Sahadeva."

Even as he spoke, Bhima came along, armed with a mace. "I knew you when you looked so keenly at our weapons. But you were a Brahmin, and I spared you. But now, prepare to die!"

He grappled with Jatasura Like two cloud-masses they circled and roared, their thighs hitting and uprooting trees. Bhima clenched his fist into the shape of a five-headed snake, and hit sharply at Jatasura's neck. The rakshasa fell, stunned; Bhima caught him in his two arms, lifted him up, and dashed him on the ground, breaking every bone in his body. Lunging hard with his elbow, he snapped the blood-spattered, gaping-eyed head from the body, as easily as a fruit is plucked from a stem.

In this manner the fifth year of exile passed: living on fruit and honey and deer shot with unpoisoned arrows, and listening to the stories of Sage Lomasha.

One day, as the brothers were relaxing on the mountain slope, Draupadi said to Bhima:

"The five-coloured flowers are falling in the river.
The wind drops them there.
Take me to the peak, Bhima, where I can see them."

So the days passed, and they waited for Arjuna, till one day a brilliant light, like a smileless tongue of flame, swooped from the sky. It was Indra's chariot, driven by Matali, and in it was Arjuna, wearing a crown and garlands. He gave his weapons and ornaments to Draupadi, narrating the manner of his obtaining them.

"We are fortunate," said Yudhishthira, "that Indra has given you these Show them to us."

Arjuna showed the Gandiva bow and the god-given conch shell, standing in his chariot. As he began to demonstrate them, the earth shock in fear, the rivers became restless, the rocks split, and the air fell silent. The sun was darkened, and fire would not flame. All the creatures of the world prayed for help. And

Narada appeared, saying, "These divine weapons are not meant for demonstration. Use them only in battle, and then only in emergency. To use them casually is to invite annihilation of the three worlds."

From the mountain forest the Pandavas move to the banks of the Sarasvati. In one of the adjoining woods Bhima came upon a gigantic snake; its body lay coiled, filling up an entire cave. Its skin was the colour of turmeric; its eyes glared; it licked the corners of its four-fanged mouth; it hissed; it was the god of death himself. The goat-swallowing snake gripped Bhima fiercely in its coils. Bhima trembled; and even the strength of ten thousand elephants failed him then. He struggled desperately, but the snake's coils tightened.

In the meantime, seeing one-eyed, one-legged, and one-winged creatures vomit blood in front of the sun, and hearing black crows shrieking "Go! Go!," Yudhishthira asked Draupadi, "Where is Bhima?" When she replied Bhima had left long ago, he turned to Arjuna, "Look after her," and hurried off in search of his brother.

Following Bhima's tracks, he came to a cave, rock-littered and shrub-covered; inside he saw Bhima gripped by the snake.

"What happened, Bhima?" He shouted.

"The snake," Bhima replied. "He is the sage Nahusha living in snake form. He wishes to devour me."

"Free him," Yudhishthira said to the snake: "I will get you other food."

"No," replied the snake. "My meal today shall be the son of a king. Go away, or you too shall get eaten tomorrow. I was one of your ancestors, the son of Ayu, fifth in descent from the Moon. I was a king, my name Nahusha. Drunk with power, I insulted some Brahmins, and this is how they cursed me. No other food will I have except your brother. But if you can answer some of my questions to my satisfaction, I will set him free."

"Ask them," said Yudhishthira.

"Who is a Brahmin? How is he recognized?"

"The man is whom we see truth, charity, forgiveness, and kindness is a Brahmin," replied Yudhishthira. "That is what the wise say. But tell me, what is the state of Brahman, the state of neither joy nor sorrow, the state beyond suffering? What do you think?"

"Even the Shudra can have truth, charity, forgiveness, and kindness," said the snake. "About the state of Brahman, it seems to me nothing is without joy or sorrow."

"A Shudra is not a Shudra by birth alone, nor is a Brahmin Brahmin by birth alone," added Yudhishthira. "And many feel like you that there is nothing without joy or sorrow. But heat is not in cold, and cold is not in heat; so why not a state in which there is neither heat nor cold?"

"But what happens to the caste system if you say character not birth makes people Brahmins or Shudras?"

"If you ask me," replied Yudhishthira, "caste is such a confused affair that no one can be sure of his own caste's purity. Men of all four castes bred children from women of all four castes; how can we make out caste distinctions now? In any case, speech, sex relations, birth and death don't follow caste rules. Character is the only thing that's certain. Doesn't Manu himself say in one place that the person of mixed caste is better than the 'pure' if the 'pure' doesn't have character?"

"How excellently you speak, Yudhishthira," said the snake. "You make it difficult for me to eat Bhima."

"You are known to be learned," said Yudhishthira. "Tell me, what does one do to attain moksha?"

"Give alms to the deserving, speak the truth, and speak it gently, be non-violent."

"Which is better, truth or non-violence?"

"One way of judging is to see how much good each does. Truth is sometimes better than alms-giving, and alms-giving can be better than truth at other times. And the same goes for gentleness and non-violence. And now I must return to the heavenly world."

Saying this, he gave up his snake form, released Bhima, and disappeared.

Then came the monsoon,
Chasing the heat, and black clouds
Rained incessantly,
Thousands of them, black cupolas in the sky;
Sun disappeared, stainless lightning flashed.
Grass, moths and reptiles relished the rain.
Rivers ran through woods with snake-hissing joy,
And the kokilas sang, and the peacocks,

And frogs croaked.
Autumn followed,
Bringing cranes and brightness,
Full of cloud-cool nights and polished skies,
Enchanted with the moon and stars;
Lilies and lotuses in the cool waters,
The blue Sarasvati as blue as the sky.
There they passed the full-moon nights of October.

When they entered the land of the Yadavas, the favourite wife of Krishna, Satyabhama, asked Draupadi in private, "How do you manage to please your husbands so well? Why are they never angry with you? Why are they so eager to fulfil every wish of yours? Are there drugs, mantras, cosmetics?"

Draupadi replied: "Satyabhama, clever women know many ways. But why ask me about the wiles of women who use drugs and mantras? You are Krishna's favourite wife, and I warn you that if you ever start using drugs, he will shun you like a serpent in his bed. I've heard of women who commit long-distance murder by sending poisonous gifts to rivals, and women responsible for causing jaundice, leprosy, impotence, lunacy and even blindness in men they hate.

"Let me tell you what my ways are: I put aside my ego, I try not to be jealous, I strive to be modest and gracious I neither bathe nor eat nor sleep till my husband has; till, in fact, our servants have. When he returns from the town or the forest, I have water and a seat ready for him. I do the household chores, cook and clean at the right time. I don't dawdle at the gate, and I don't laugh unless the joke is really good. I am never long in the bathroom or in pleasure gardens. Giggling is out of the question. I fret when he's gone, and give up sandal paste and flowers. I see that things which don't appeal to him don't appeal to me either. A husband is a god to his wife, isn't he? One thing more—I never speak ill of my mother-in-law.

"Don't ask me what painted women do to hold their husbands—I don't know—but I could tell you of simple ways. A husband gives us children, a husband gives us beds and seats, dresses and perfumes and garlands, even fame in society and happiness in heaven. Why not act in a way that will make him feel *She* *really loves me.* When he orders a maid to get something, get up and fetch it yourself. When he is at the gate, be ready to give him your seat and offer to wash his feet. Shun his enemies. Don't be careless and frivolous when other men are present; be silent about what you think; and don't be alone too much even with your own sons. Avoid women who drink, shout, steal, gorge and gossip. And learn how to make yourself attractive with ornaments, perfumes and unguents."

It so happened that a well-known Brahmin, fluent in the art of speech, went to the court of Dhritarashtra after visiting the Pandavas, and told him stories of the great misery that had fallen to the lot of Yudhishthira and his brothers. He mentioned Draupadi also, helpless and poverty-stricken.

Dhritarashtra was deeply moved, knowing his guilty involvement, but controlled himself by a supreme act of will. "Did you say Yudhishthira sleeps on the bare ground? And Duryodhana, Shakuni and Duhshasana prosper! Did you say Arjuna is back, and wields his Gandiva bow again? Good—there is none to withstand him."

Shakuni reported the King's feelings to Duryodhana. "They are now staying near the lake of Dvaitavana. Let us pay them a visit. Is there a pleasure greater than looking from one's prosperity down at another's misfortune, than watching from a hilltop mankind crawling below? Dress up your wife in the most expensive clothes and ornaments, and let us see poor Draupadi burn with envy, dressed in bark and deerskin."

Duryodhana was highly pleased. But next moment depression overtook him.

"What you say, Shakuni, is good," he said, "but I won't go to get the King's permission. He favours them. Let's think of a different plan."

Next morning Karna came smiling to Duryodhana. "How about this? Our cattle are grazing near the lake of Dvaitavana. Let's go on the pretext of herding them. The King will easily give permission."

"He may even order us to go there!" laughed Shakuni.

They instructed a cowherd named Samanga to explain to the King the urgency of herding the cattle.

"Cattle need to be regularly herded and examined," remarked Dhritarashtra. "You cannot always depend upon the herdsmen. But I have been told the Pandavas are presently encamped there. I do not think now is the right time for cattle-inspection."

"But, sire," said Shakuni, "the Pandavas are not our object in going. We will not go where they are encamped. We'll see that they are not disturbed."

The King granted permission, and Duryodhana moved out with a large entourage. With him were Duhshasana, Shakuni, their wives, and thousands of other ladies; eight thousand chariots, thirty thousand elephants, nine thousand horses, and any number of foot soldiers, poets, musicians, pavilions, shops, and carriages.

He encamped on the outskirts of the cattle station, selecting a soothing, well-watered site. Hundreds and thousands of cattle were examined; all three-year old calves branded and counted; and all uncalved cows placed in a separate enclosure.

"Let us build pleasure houses here," ordered Duryodhana.

On the edges of the forest, however, stood a line of gandharvas, forbidding the entry of the soldiers.

"Stand aside!" the soldiers shouted. "We come under orders of King Duryodhana, son of Dhritarashtra."

"Has he lost his senses?" laughed the gandharvas. "Since when have mortals started ordering the dwellers of heaven?"

"Punish them!" ordered Duryodhana.

The soldiers moved in, and the gandharvas reported the intrusion to their king, Chitrasena. Then they attacked with upraised weapons, and the Kuru soldiers fled helter-skelter, under Duryodhana's very nose. Karna alone stood firm in his chariot, while they continued to assault him with swords, battle axes, and spears, cutting his chariot's yoke, flagstaff and shaft, ripping his royal umbrella, pulling apart the wooden fenders, slicing through lynch pins, till, in an attempt to save his life, he leapt out of his shattered chariot into Vikarna's.

Duryodhana too stood firm, but they hacked his charioteer and horses to death. Then Chitrasena jumped on him and caught him in a death-like grip. Duryodhana was made captive along with all the ladies of his entourage.

Wailing loudly, his followers went to Yudhishthira, begging him for help.

"This is all the result of Duryodhana's plan to make fun of us," Bhima told them. "It is good to know there's at least one man in the world helping us. Wicked Duryodhana deserves what he gets."

He was interrupted by Yudhishthira. "This is not the time for bitterness. They need our help, and they have come to us. Families are always quarrelling—does that mean one member won't help another in a crisis? Doesn't the gandharva king know we have been staying in this forest for some time? Yet he insults us, and our ladies! Go, persuade him to free Duryodhana. If he won't listen to persuasion, push him a little. If he is still stubborn, crush him, and bring the Kurus back."

Arjuna immediately vowed to do as told. As predicted by Yudhishthira, there was, first, a skirmish; when that failed, Arjuna shouted: "Free Duryodhana!" The gandharvas laughed: "We take orders from Chitrasena only. We are dwellers of heaven."

"Do dwellers of heaven go about insulting wives of mortals?" asked Arjuna.

In the battle that followed, the golden-garlanded gandharvas fell in hundreds. The four brothers' chariots were smashed, and they fought on foot, raining arrows on the flying gandharvas. Some rose swiftly into the sky, taking with them Duryodhana. But Arjuna's net of arrows brought them down and they were trapped like birds in a cage. Heads, arms, and legs rained from the sky like stones.

"Have you had enough, Chitrasena?" shouted Arjuna. "Free Duryodhana!"

"He's a rascal," replied Chitrasena. "He doesn't deserve to be freed. He tricked Yudhishthira and insulted Draupadi. Does Yudhishthira know his real reason for coming here? Tell him."

The gandharvas were finally persuaded by Yudhishthira to set Duryodhana and his entourage free, and they left, happy. Chitrasena sprinkled divine nectar on the dead gandharvas and resuscitated them.

"Never try such a trick again," Yudhishthira admonished Duryodhana. "Be happy, and return to your capital."

Overcome with shame, Duryodhana returned, and the Pandavas continued to pass their days in peace in the forest of Dvaitavana.

Duryodhana was sitting on a high bed, like a moon in eclipse, when Karna met him the next morning.

"It is good you are back," Karna said, "and the gandharvas vanquished. I retreated when my soldiers broke ranks and fled. But you and your soldiers and the ladies have returned safely, I see."

"You don't know the whole story," replied Duryodhana. "The Pandavas did all the fighting, not I. Better I had died on the battlefield than lived to see such shame. Leave me alone. I have nothing now to do with virtue, wealth, friendship and kingship. I shall undertake a fast to the death."

In spite of protests, he stuck to his resolve He spread *kusha* grass on the ground, purified himself with water, and sat down to meditate, shutting off all connection with the phenomenal world, inspired only by the hope of salvation.

Simultaneously the fierce Daityas and Danavas who, defeated by the gods, dwelt in the middle regions, also commenced a sacrifice, knowing that if Duryodhana died, they would be left defenceless. With the help of mantras chanted at the sacrifice, they sent a goddess to summon Duryodhana; when he arrived, they said to him, "You are our only hope, even as the Pandavas are the only hope of the gods. Go—and may victory be yours." The goddess who had brought him before them now transported him back, paid her respects, and vanished; so that when he opened his eyes, he thought it had all been a dream.

And he vowed: "I shall annihilate the Pandavas in battle."

Karna, smiling, came to him the next day. "You see, dead men win no battles. Living is what matters. Let's make our plans fearlessly and carefully."

First they ordered the commencement of the greatest of all sacrifices, the Rajasuya. Artisans hammered out a golden plough, and Duryodhana sent messengers inviting the Pandavas to witness the ritual.

"Not now," was Yudhishthira's reply. "Not until we complete our thirteen years of exile. But it is good news that Duryodhana is celebrating the Rajasuya."

Bhima said: "Tell him we'll be back after the thirteenth year, and if the fire is still burning we'll throw him in it."

The others kept silent.

When the Rajasuya was completed—Brahmins fed, princes and kings entertained, wealth lavishly bestowed—Duryodhana entered

Hastinapura. "Blessed are you," said some citizens, sprinkling fried paddy and sandal paste on his head. But others murmured, "This sacrifice was nothing compared to Yudhishthira's. Not a sixteenth part of the glory." And his friends remarked, "Your sacrifice has surpassed all others." Duryodhana went to his inner chambers, pleased with himself.

But, as reports trickled in of the happiness of the Pandavas in the forest, his heart burned with mischief. Even as he, Duhshasana and Karna were planning ways of harming the Pandavas, the well-known sage Durvasas arrived in Hastinapura with ten thousand followers. Duryodhana received him with great courtesy and humility, attending on him as does a servant, though Durvasas had come to stay only for a few days.

"I am hungry," the sage would saddenly say. "Bring me food."

Sometimes he would go out for a bath, return late at night, and say, "I am not hungry," and disappear.

Again: "Bring us all food. Quickly!"

Sometimes he would insist on dinner at midnight, and complain that the food was badly cooked, unfit for human consumption.

When he saw that his whims left Duryodhana unruffled, he was pleased.

"I am great giver of boons," he said. "Ask from me anything so long as it isn't opposed to dharma."

"Yudhishthira is my eldest brother," said Duryodhana, who had already consulted Karna and Duhshasana about the nature of the boon he would ask. "He is now in the forest, along with his brothers. Be his guest, O holy one, even as you have been mine, along with all your disciples. Give me this boon, that you will go to him when, having fed the Brahmins and her husbands, Draupadi wishes to take rest."

Durvasas appeared with ten thousand disciples exactly as desired by Duryodhana. Receiving him respectfully, Yudhishthira said:

"Return to us after you have finished your ablutions, O holy one."

While the host of ascetics bathed in the river, Draupadi worried about the food. In her distress, she prayed to Krishna:

"O Krishna, son Devaki,
Lord of the universe, of inexhaustible powers,
Krishna of the blue-lotus skin,
Krishna of the white-lily eyes,
Saffron-robed Krishna,
Help me now!"

Leaving the bed of his wife Rukmini, Krishna hurried to Draupadi; she bowed to him, and told him about Durvasas and the ascetics.

"I am starving," said Krishna, "give me something to eat quickly."

She looked confused. "But my sun-given bowl is empty."

"This is not the time for jokes," replied Krishna. "I am hungry. Bring the bowl here."

In the bowl he saw a single grain of rice and a vegetable particle clinging to the rim. He licked them up. "My hunger is satisfied," he told her. "Call the holy ones to dinner."

Bhima went to the riverside, and found the ascetics rubbing their stomachs and declaring they were full. They came out of the river, and gaped at each other.

"We ordered dinner, but now we are full," they said to Durvasas. "What shall we do?"

"It's a great wrong to spoil so much food," Durvasas said. "Yudhishthira is a virtuous man. I know he has power to punish us."

They fled in all directions.

So the days passed, each season bringing new flowers. One day, the Pandavas left Draupadi alone in the ashrama, and went out to hunt game in order to feed their Brahmin followers. Passing that way was the richly-dressed Jayadratha, King of Sindhu, planning to marry in the kingdom of Shalva; with him were many princes. Halting in the forest of Kamyaka, he saw Draupadi standing outside the hermitage. Her perfect figure lit up the dark woods around her, as lightning does clouds. All who looked wondered if she was an apsara, a daughter of the gods, or a divine phantom. They gazed spellbound.

But lust stirred in Jayadratha, and he turned to Kotika. "Who is she? Is she human? I have no wish to marry if I can have her. Go, ask her how she happens to be here, and who is her husband. Ask her, Kotika, if she will accept me as her lord."

Kotika jumped out of his chariot, and approached her.

"Lovely lady,
Exquisite as a night flame fanned by wind,
Are you a goddess, an apsara, a yakshi,
The daughter of a Naga King, or the wife of a Daitya?
Tell us.
I am King Suratha's son, my name is Kotika,
And King Jayadratha is here, with six thousand chariots."

She looked past him, released the *kadamba* branch, and adjusted her silk dress. "Because there is no other person here, I will reply to you personally, though I know this is not proper. I am Draupadi, daughter of King Drupada, and wife of the five Pandava brothers. They have gone hunting, leaving me alone, Yudhishthira to the east, Bhima south, Arjuna west, and the twins north. You are welcome to our hospitality here. Yudhishthira will be happy to see you when he returns."

Saying this, the moon-lovely Draupadi went inside the ashrama.

"Even her words bewitch me," said Jayadratha when Kotika reported Draupadi's reply. "Why did you return empty-handed? Listen to me, Kotika. She has bewitched me. All other women are monkeys! I must see her again."

Like wolves slinking into a cave, he and six others entered the ashrama.

"Lovely lady, are your husbands well?" he asked Draupadi. "And are all who are dear to you well?"

"They are well, sir," replied Draupadi. "And is everything right with your kingdom, your government, and your army? Here is water to wash your feet. And here is a seat for you. I give you fifty animals for your retinue's breakfast."

"You honour me by offering it. The offer alone is sufficient," replied Jayadratha. "Come with me in my chariot and let me make you happy. O lovely-hipped lady, be my wife, and share the kingdom of Sindhu and Sauvira with me."

She rose, frightened; she frowned, her eyebrows narrowed.

"Be ashamed!" she said with contempt. "Never speak those words to me again." Knowing that her husbands would soon return, she began to speak to him, playing for time.

Her face was red with anger. "The bamboo and the plantain bear fruit and perish. You are like a crab giving birth to her own destruction. My husbands will kill you."

"I have heard of the Pandavas," said Jayadratha, "and I know what I am doing. Don't get the impression I am not a great king—the Pandavas to me are nothing. Words won't help, Draupadi—come with me. Do not force me to force you."

Seeing him about to lay hands on her, she shouted, "Keep your lustful hands off me!" He seized her upper dress, and she pushed him. He toppled like a tree falling, but quickly rose and seized her again. She panted for breath. He dragged her to the chariot.

Dhaumya, the priest of the Pandavas, emerged from the hermitage She touched his feet.

"Jayadratha, you know the Kshatriya custom," said Dhaumya. "You have not defeated her husbands in a fair fight. You have no right to take her away. Your ill deed be on your head!"

He began to follow Jayadratha's chariot on foot.

When the Pandavas returned, a jackal howled near the ashrama. They found Draupadi's maid, Dhatreyika, sobbing. Wiping her beautiful face, she said, "Jayadratha has carried her away. Chase him! The branches on the track are still green. A flower has been thrown in a graveyard! A dog has lapped up sacred water! A lily has been torn by a jackal! A scoundrel is thrusting his kisses on your moon-lovely wife!"

"Shut up!" ordered Yudhishthira. "Get out of our sight."

They began to follow the tracks, breathing deep snake-sighs, and twanging their bowstrings. They saw a cloud of dust in the distance; then they saw Dhaumya; and they rushed like hawks on Jayadratha's forces. Blind with rage, they attacked the panic-stricken infantry, darkening the sky with their arrows, striking at the charioteers, till all broke ranks and fled.

Jayadratha, leaving Draupadi behind, also fled, but in his terrified confusion took the path which led back to the ashrama.

"Even Indra cannot save Jayadratha now," said Bhima. "He dies at my hands."

"Remember our sister Duhshala, and think of Gandhari," cautioned Yudhishthira, "before you think of killing him, wicked though he might be."

But the excited Draupadi said, "If you want to please me, kill him. The stealer of a wife or a kingdom gets no mercy. He dies."

Bhima and Arjuna pursued Jayadratha, and Arjuna shot down his horses, though they were two miles ahead, with the help of divine arrows. Then they rushed at him, even as he prepared to run in terrified haste.

"Turn round, Jayadratha," shouted Arjuna. "Turn round, brave king, abductor of a woman!"

But Jayadratha did not once look back; Bhima jumped down from his chariot, ran after him, seized him by his hair, and pushed him violently; he fell sprawling on the ground. Bhima picked him up by his hair, and struck him with his fist. He fell down, unconscious; he groaned, and tried to struggle to his feet. Bhima kicked him in the head, and sat on his chest, hitting with knees and fists, till he lost consciousness again.

When Arjuna tried to pacify him, reminding him of Yudhishthira's words, Bhima answered:

"This rascal deserves to die! Yudhishthira has sweet ideas of dharma."

He shaved off Jayadratha's hair, leaving five irregular tufts.

To the silent Jayadratha, he said: "If you wish to live, go and, in court and field, say: *I am a slave of the Pandavas.*"

Shaking, half-conscious, Jayadratha agreed. Chaining him, they pushed him into their chariot, drove back to the ashrama, and brought him before Yudhishthira.

"Inform Draupadi he's here," said Bhima to Yudhishthira.

"If you have any love for me," Yudhishthira remarked, "you will set him free."

Draupadi added, "Yes, let him go. He goes as our slave, disfigured with five tufts of hair."

"Be ashamed—and go," said Arjuna. "Abductor of a woman!"

His head bent, Jayadratha silently went to the banks of the Ganga, where he practised severe penance before the three-eyed god Shiva. Shiva was pleased and asked him what boon he wanted.

"Give me power to defeat the five Pandavas in battle," said Jayadratha.

"Impossible." said Shiva. "There is not man born who can do that. But I give you this boon: once only will you be able to defeat the Pandavas, all excepting Arjuna."

Shiva disappeared, Jayadratha returned to his kingdom, and the Pandavas continued to live in the forest of Kamyaka.

One day, a stag, using his antlers, picked up a sacrificial staff and two fire-sticks from the ashrama, and ran off. The Brahmin reported the loss to Yudhishthira, who immediately armed himself and, along with the brothers, went out in pursuit of the stag. They shot arrows and threw spears at it, but failed to kill it. And then, without warning, it melted into thin air. Tired, frustrated, hungry and thirsty, they sat down in the cool shadows of a banyan.

"Strange," said Nakula, "how did he escape us? What wrong have we ever done?"

"No one except Dharma knows who gets what, and when," replied Yudhishthira.

"I know that this would not have happened if I had killed Duhshasana when he dragged Draupadi by the hair," said Bhima.

"It's perhaps because I kept silent when he filthily abused her," said Arjuna.

"I should have killed him," said Sahadeva.

"Nakula," said Yudhishthira, "climb this tree and survey the ten points of the horizon. Is there any sight of water?"

Nakula quickly climbed up and said, "I see many trees, and I think I hear the cry of water cranes."

"Take these quivers," said Yudhishthira, "bring them back filled with water."

As Nakula was about to drink from the waters of the clear lake, he heared a voice from the sky:

"Stop! This lake is mine. Who drinks must first answer my questions"

But Nakula was so thirsty that he drank, disregarding the words; and immediately fell down dead.

When Nakula failed to return, Yudhishthira sent Sahadeva with instructions to find his brother and bring water. Sahadeva saw Nakula lying dead on the ground, and proceeded, like him, to quench his thirst.

Again the voice spoke, repeating the warning, and Sahadeva disregarded it and fell down dead.

Yudhishthira sent Arjuna next. Arjuna noticed the dead bodies of his brothers, and, stringing his bow, began to reconnoitre in the forest.

"Do you think force will work?" said the voice. "He only drinks who first answers my questions."

"Who are you?" shouted Arjuna. "Stand in front of me! Let me see if you speak the same way when my arrows get a taste of you."

He shot thousands of arrows in the direction of the voice, but in vain.

"Don't tire yourself, sir," said the voice, "He drinks who answers my questions."

Arjuna knelt and drank, and dropped down dead.

Next came Bhima When he saw the corpses of his brothers, he reflected, "Some rakshasa has done this; let me refresh myself first," and rushed to the lake to quench his thirst. Again the voice spoke, but Bhima did not listen; he drank, and fell down dead.

"What is the matter with them? I must go and see what they are doing," mused Yudhishthira. He came to the lake fringed with lush green trees humming with black bees, and saw his brothers lying in a row, dead. Seeing Arjuna, he sighed deeply; and wept. Over Bhima's body he said, "You, Bhima, had promised to smash Duryodhana's thigh with your mace." They lay there, but with no deathly pallor on them, as if sleeping; and Yudhishthira saw them, thinking *Such is life*; and did not know what to do.

As he stepped into the lake for his ablutions, he heard the voice.

"I am a crane. I live on fish. I have overpowered your brothers and taken them to the world of the dead. Who drinks here answers my questions first. Answer, O king, or drink and die."

He appeared before Yudhishthira in the form of a yaksha, tall like a palm tree, huge-eyed and huge-bodied, shining like the sun and roaring like a cloud.

"Ask," said Yudhishthira, "I'll answer as I can."

"What makes the sun rise?" said the yaksha. "What makes him set? Who keeps him company, who keeps him going?"

"Brahma makes the sun rise, and Dharma makes him set,' answered Yudhishthira. "The gods keep him company, and truth keeps him going."

"What person lives and yet is not alive?"

"The man who offers nothing to the gods, guests, servants, ancestors, and himself, lives and is yet not alive."

"What is more dependable than the earth? higher than the sky? swifter than the wind? more countless than grass?"

"A mother is more dependable than the earth, a father higher than the sky; the mind is swifter than the wind, our thoughts more countless than grass."

"Who sleeps with eyes open, who does not move after birth, who is without heart, what swells by itself?"

"A fish, an egg, a stone, a river," replied Yudhishthira.

"Who is the friend of the exile? Who is the friend of the householder? who is a friend of the sick? who is the friend of the dying?"

"A companion, a wife, a doctor, and charity."

"What gets the best praise? what is the most precious possession? the best profit? the best happiness?"

"Skill, knowledge, health, and serenity."

"What is the highest duty? which virtue always brings success? what, controlled, is never regretted? And who are they who never break word?"

"Non-violence is the highest duty, the rituals of the Vedas always bring success; the mind, controlled, never leads to regret; and the good never break their word."

"What, when renounced, is agreeable? creates no regret? brings wealth? gives happiness?"

"Ego, anger, passion, greed."

"What envelops the world? what prevents self-realisation? what makes people forsake friends? What prevents the attainment of heaven?"

"Darkness envelops the world, darkness blocks self-realisation; greed forsakes friends, and lust for this world prevents attainment of heaven."

"What is ignorance, ego, laziness, grief?"

"Ignorance is not knowing one's duty, ego is excessive self-consciousness, laziness is not doing one's duty, and ignorance is grief."

"What is pride, what is hypocrisy? What is the grace of the gods, and what is wickedness?"

"Smugness is pride, dogma is hypocrisy. The grace of the gods is the fruit of our actions, and wickedness is wishing ill of others."

"What makes a Brahmin—birth, character, study, or wisdom?"

"Neither birth nor study nor wisdom. It is character that makes a Brahmin."

"Who is the truly happy man? what is the most wonderful thing in life? What is the path?"

"The man who cooks in his own house and is not in debt, is truly happy. Day after day thousands die, yet the living act as if they are going to live for ever—this is the most wonderful thing in life. Argument is futile—the scriptures differ—no sage has the whole truth—the truths of dharma are hidden from our eyes—this world is riddled with ignorance. What good men have followed, that is the path."

"Beautifully answered," said the yaksha. "Choose one among your brothers to live."

"Let the dark-skinned Nakula live," said Yudhishthira.

"People say you love Bhima and Arjuna dearly," remarked the yaksha. "Why do you pick Nakula?"

"My father had two wives, Kunti had Madri," answered Yudhishthira. "As my mother Kunti is to me, so also is Madri. Nakula is Madri's son—let him live. Dharma, protected, protects; dharma, violated, destroys. There is no greater virtue than ahimsa."

"Since you speak so nobly," said the yaksha, "all your brothers will live."

The Pandavas stirred.

"I am Dharma, your father," said the yaksha to Yudhishthira. "Desirous of seeing and testing you, I came as the stag who ran off with the sacred sticks. Ask another boon."

"We have spent twelve years in the forest," said Yudhishthira. "Let no one recognise us during the thirteenth year."

"You will spend the thirteenth year in Virata's kingdom, and no one in the three worlds will pierce your disguise," said Dharma. "And each of you will have power to assume any form he likes."

Saying which, he vanished; the Pandavas woke and returned to their ashrama.

The Fourth Book:
The Kingdom of Virata

Yudhishthira called a meeting of the brothers and said, "Twelve years have passed. Think of a place, Arjuna, where we can spend our thirteenth year without being discovered."

"I can think of any number of charming, hidden spots which surround the kingdom of the Kurus: Panchala, Chedi, Matsya, Surasena, Malla, Saurashtra, Avanti, and Kuntirashtra. Any of these would do."

"The King of Matsya, Virata, is old and venerable," said Yudhishthira. "His kingdom appeals to me. I shall go there as a Brahmin, and call myself Kanka, the gambler. I'll delight them with chess games. If the king asks for my credentials, I shall say, 'I am a friend of Yudhishthira'."

"I shall be Vallaba, the cook," said Bhima, "unsurpassed in the preparation of exquisite curries for the royal palate."

"I'll be a eunuch," said Arjuna, "though how I'll hide the bowstring marks on my arms I do not know. Perhaps I'll cover them with bangles. A plait will hang at the back of my head, and rings from my ears. I'll be Brihannala, teller of tales to the king and to the palace ladies. I'll sing, dance, and play on musical instruments; and if anyone asks for my credentials, I was a waiting maid of Draupadi in the palace of Yudhishthira."

"What about you, Nakula, graceful and modest?" asked Yudhishthira.

"I am Granthika, keeper of the king's horses."

"And you, Sahadeva?"

"The keeper of his cows, Tantripal," replied Sahadeva.

"And our beloved wife, Draupadi, respected like a mother or an elder sister by us? You have known luxury since birth, you are not used to hard work," said Yudhishthira.

"I shall be Sairindhri, hairdresser to the queen Sudheshna," she replied, "and explain that I served as a waiting maid in Yudhishthira's palace."

"Very well," said Yudhishthira to Draupadi, "but you know little of the ways of the world. Learn to be careful. Behave in a way that doesn't rouse lust in wicked men."

Buckling their swords and wearing lizard-skin finger protectors, the Pandavas proceeded towards the river Yamuna's southern bank, to the land of the Matsyas.

"I see tracks here, and fields," said Draupadi. "Let us rest the night here. I am tired."

Arjuna picked her up and carried her to the outskirts of the capital.

"What shall we do with our weapons?" asked Yudhishthira. "The citizens will be alarmed if we take them with us. Everyone knows about the Gandiva bow. If we are discovered, another twelve-year exile awaits us."

"Near the burial ground on that mountain is a huge *sami* tree," suggested Arjuna. "Let's hide our weapons in its tangled branches."

Nakula climbed the tree and tied the weapons—bows and razor-sharp arrows, long swords and quivers—high up in branches that would not crack under the weight and where the rainwater would not reach. They also hung a corpse on the tree, knowing the stench would drive people away. Questioned by shepherds about the corpse, the Pandavas said, "It is our mother's; she died at the age of one hundred and eighty. It's our custom to dangle corpses from trees."

Then they entered the capital, Yudhishthira memorising the code names of the brothers—Jaya, Jayanta, Vijaya, Jayatsena and Jayatbala—for his satisfaction. Seeing Yudhishthira enter the court, King Virata turned to his advisers and said, "Who is he, so handsome and erect? He has neither slaves, nor chariots, nor elephants, yet he looks like Indra himself."

Yudhishthira came before the king and said, "I am a Brahmin who, having lost everything, comes to you for help."

"You are welcome," said Virata, "but who are you?"

"My name is Kanka, and I am good at dice. I am a friend of Yudhishthira, and my family is known as the Vaiyaghra."

"I like clever gamblers," said Virata. "Stay in the palace."

"But on two conditions, sire," said Yudhishthira. "First, I want no gambling quarrels with low-caste players. Second, the man I defeat at dice has no longer any right to the wealth I win from him."

"Granted. The man who displeases you shall be banished from our kingdom. You have full scope here. Do as you like. Recommend whomever you like. He shall be rewarded. Treat this palace as yours."

Tying her long, soft, black hair in a knotted braid which she allowed to hang over her right shoulder, but covered under a fold of her expensive black dress, Draupadi wandered in the city in the guise of a female artisan. Queen Sudeshna saw her from the palace terrace, summoned her, and asked, "Who are you?"

"A female artisan," replied Draupadi. "I serve anyone who gives me food and lodging."

"It is hard to believe," said the queen. "You are too beautiful. Your heels are delicate, your navel deep, your thighs touch each other; your breasts and hips are round; you speak as sweetly as a swan, and your body has all the auspicious marks of a Kashmiri mare. Curved eyelashes, red-brown lips, slender waist, a conch-shell neck, a face like the moon—you must be the goddess Sri herself. Who will be able to resist your charms? Certainly not my husband. Your smile and your glance will entrap anyone. If I keep you in the palace, I'll be like a person who climbs a tree only to fall, or a crab conceiving for her own destruction."

"Neither your husband nor anyone else will have me, my queen." replied Draupadi. "I am already married to five powerful gandharvas. Any man who attempts to molest me, dies that very night. I will not serve a person who gives me food touched by another, nor will I wash another's feet."

"In that case, you are welcome. I agree to your conditions."

Next to appear at the gates was a tall, handsome man wearing feminine ornaments, large earrings and gold conch bangles, with long hair flowing down his neck.

Approaching the king, he said:

"My name is Brihannala. I sing, I dance, I play on musical instruments. Let me be dancing tutor to the princess Uttara. Do not ask me to explain how I came to be a eunuch—it is a painful story."

"If that is all you wish—I can see you deserve more—I permit you to be dancing tutor to the princess and to the other palace ladies."

King Virata ordered an examination of Brihannala's various skills, and sent women to inspect him physically. Convinced of the permanent nature of his defect, he sent Arjuna to the ladies' quarters.

So the months passed for the Pandavas, living disguised in Virata's capital, months of hardship for Draupadi who used to luxury, was compelled to wait on others. But she did her best, pleasing Queen Sudeshna and the other palace ladies.

In the last days of her stay, she happened to attract the attention of Kichaka, brother of the Queen and general of Virata's army. His desire roused, he went to Sudeshna.

"Who is that new girl? Her beauty intoxicates me, like the fragrance of fresh wine. She is too good to serve you; let her command me."

Then he went to Draupadi.

"Who are you, lovely lady.
What a face like the moon, a voice like the koel's, and eyes like lotuses?
Your full and graceful breasts need garlands of gold,
There is no space for a reed between them.
When you walk,
Desire stirs within me;
Your waist is four-wrinkled and your breasts make you stoop,
Your breasts are like lotus buds—
They inflame me to desire.
Your hips are like a river bank;
For you I will abandon my wives,
Dress you in garlands and robes and jewellery,
Love you as a rain-filled cloud
Loves the earth with its soothing showers."

"I am already married," replied Draupadi. "It does not become you to love a low-caste woman, a hair-dressing maid."

But lust had possessed him, blinding him to the taint of adultery.

"Look at me," he said. "I have everything that is considered desirable—youth, good looks, wealth. Accept me and enjoy this kingdom with me."

"I have five gandharva husbands to protect me. You are sick; you do not know the fate that will overtake you," replied Draupadi.

Kichaka hurried to Sudeshna and said, "I am in love with her. Find a way of sending her to me."

Feeling pity for her brother, Sudeshna said, "At the time of the festival I will order her to go to your room on the pretence of fetching food and wine for me. She will be alone; see if you can persuade her to change her mind."

But when instructed thus by Sudeshna, Draupadi replied, "You know the conditions on which I agreed to work here, my lady. Kichaka lusts for me. I cannot go. Send another maid."

"He will not molest you. He knows I have sent you. Go," said Sudeshna, giving Draupadi a gold vessel to hold wine. Saying to herself *May the truth of my faithfulness to my husbands protect me*, Draupadi went to Kichaka's quarters. She thought of the sun god Surya, who despatched an invisible rakshasa to guard her.

Kichaka rose when he saw Draupadi enter like a frightened deer.

"I am fortunate tonight," he said, "for you have come. I have bracelets, conches, gold earrings, rubies and deer skins for you. For you I have made an excellent bed. Sit with me; let us drink this honeyflower wine together."

"I am sent by the queen to fetch wine," said Draupadi.

"Others will take care of that." He caught hold of her right arm.

"I have never been unfaithful to my husbands," Draupadi said.

He seized the end of her upper garment as she tried to run away. Trembling with anger, and panting, she pushed him. He fell. Still shaking, she ran to Yudhishthira's quarters. But Kichaka pursued her, caught her by the hair, threw her on the ground, and kicked her in Yudhishthira's presence. At that moment the rakshasa appointed to guard her shoved Kichaka away; he fell down unconscious.

Both Bhima and Yudhishthira saw this happen. Bhima seethed with rage; sweaty wrinkles appeared on his forehead; heat emanated from his eyes. He rose, but Yudhishthira, afraid of being discovered, held him back.

"Go, cook," said Yudhishthira, "and chop down a tree for fuel. Go!"

Draupadi turned to King Virata. "He has insulted me, sire, the faithful wife of five gandharvas, in your own court! Is there no dharma in this kingdom? Does no one protest?

"I do not know even the cause of the quarrel," said Virata. "How can I judge who is guilty?"

Sweat appeared on Yudhishthira's forehead. "Go to the queen's quarters," he said. "It seems your gandharva husbands do not consider your insult sufficiently provoking for them to intervene. Go! This isn't the place to show the court how well you can act. There's a time for everything. Can't you see you are interrupting a dice game?"

"I can see that," replied the angry Draupadi. "My eldest husband also didn't want his dice games interrupted." And she ran with her hair dishevelled to Sudeshna's room.

"What is the matter?" asked the queen. "Who has hurt you? Why are you crying?"

"Kichaka insulted me."

"The fool! If you so wish, I will order his death," said Sudeshna.

"He will die all right," said Draupadi. "If I am not mistaken, he will die today."

She went to her room, cleaned herself and, as she was washing her clothes, she reflected, *What shall I do? What shall I do?* Then she thought of Bhima. She left her bed at night and went to his room, where he lay fast asleep, snoring like a lion.

Like a crane to her mate, like a three-year old cow to a bull, she approached him. She embraced him, as a creeper embraces a sal tree, as an elephant her mate, and spoke to him softly and sweetly, like the gandharva note of a vina.

"Why are you sleeping, Bhima, like a dead man? Look at me, look at your disgraced wife!"

Bhima sat up. "Tell me everything."

"What is there to tell that you don't already know?" said Draupadi. "Any woman married to Yudhishthira would be afflicted with many griefs. Every day Kichaka asks me to become his wife. What does Yudhishthira do? He plays dice.

"And look at you, Bhima. I feel sorry for you. A cook! You a cook! Virata's cook! A cook called Vallaba—that's what they'll say. When the queen and her ladies make you fight tigers and buffaloes for their amusement, I nearly die of fear. And when they see me in a faint, they cluster round, and the queen says, 'O she loves him. See how she feels for him. They're having an affair. Didn't they arrive together?'

"Look at Arjuna! Doing his hair like a woman and teaching the ladies how to dance. A hero with earrings! I'm ashamed. O Bhima, I could die!" She began to sob silently, looking quickly at him now and again. "What a terrible crime I must have committed, Bhima, that my karma should bring me to this."

He lifted her soft hands to his face, and sighed.

"Yudhishthira stopped me when I rose to avenge your insult," he said. "I know of your grief But Sita was united with Rama, Savitri with Satyavan; and so will you with happiness, when our thirteenth year is over."

"Don't misunderstand me, Bhima," said Draupadi. "I have nothing against Yudhishthira. Grief made me say things I did not mean to. But Sudeshna is jealous of my beauty, and thinks her husband is attracted to me. And when I tell Kichaka my five gandharva husbands will avenge his immoral advances to me, he laughs and says he isn't afraid of a hundred thousand gandharvas. He's wicked, Bhima—I know it: he's proud, adulterous, ruthless. You saved me from Jayadratha when he molested me, and from Jatasura. Kill Kichaka! Smash him like a clay pot on a stone! Let him not see the sun of tomorrow. If he lives after tonight, I shall take poison and die. I shall take poison and die in your arms, Bhima."

She put her face on his chest and wept uncontrollably. He wiped away her tears and consoled her; and he said:

"Do not worry, Kichaka will die. Arrange a tryst with him tomorrow night in the dancing hall where the girls perform for the king. See that no one else knows."

Painfully the night passed. Next morning, Kichaka met Draupadi in the palace.

"Who was there to save you when I kicked you yesterday? Did the king raise a finger in protest? Accept me. I'll give you a hundred male and a hundred female servants."

"But no one must know," said Draupadi. "I'm afraid of my husbands. No one—not even your friends and brothers. Promise this, and I will come."

"Tonight then—and no one knows."

"I'll meet you in the dancing hall after sunset."

That half day passed for her like a slow month. Kichaka went to his quarters, decked himself with fine clothes, garlands and ornaments, sprinkled himself with perfumes and waited for the endless day to pass. Like the last bright flicker of a dying oil lamp, his beauty shone richly that day.

In the meantime Draupadi went to the palace kitchen and said to Bhima:

"In the dancing hall, tonight. Kill him there. I thank you."

"He and his friends die tonight," promised Bhima. "I'll crush him as an elephant crushes a *vela* fruit."

That evening Bhima disguised himself, lay on the couch in the dancing hall, and waited. Kichaka arrived punctually in all his finery, smiling:

"I come to you, lovely lady, with promises of palaces and servants and jewellery, all waiting for you."

"You are quite a ladies' man," Bhima whispered, "but this is a different kind of lady." He jumped out of the bed and seized Kichaka's hair. Kichaka clutched his arms, and they grappled. First Bhima fell with a noise of splitting bamboo; then Kichaka, like a storm-tossed tree. Bhima hit him hard on the chest, sat on him, pummelled his body and pulled his hair, knees digging into his stomach. When Kichaka's battered body went limp, Bhima began rolling it on the ground; he paused, then struck fiercely again at the corpse, pounding with fists, legs, neck and head, till only a ball of pulpy flesh remained.

Then he called Draupadi.

"Look at the lustful swine!" he said, lighting a torch, and again pounded the corpse with his feet.

He returned to the kitchen, while the delighted Draupadi woke the door-keepers. "My gandharva husbands have killed Kichaka," she said. They rushed to the dancing hall with lighted torches, and saw the bloody armless and legless fleshy mess on the floor. Hundreds of others collected, and gazed terrified at Kichaka, lying like a tortoise dragged out of a lake.

Some of Kichaka's kinsmen, seeing Draupadi standing nearby, began to murmur: "Let us burn her with him." With Virata's permission, they seized her and began to forcibly drag her to the burning ground. Bhima heard her loud appeals for help and, disguised, slipped out of the kitchen, leapt over the well, and rushed at them with the trunk of a tree he had uprooted.

They scattered, screaming, "Her gandharva husband is here!" and set her free, but Bhima slaughtered one hundred and five kinsmen of Kichaka. Their corpses littered the ground, like forest trees felled in a storm.

The citizens went to the king. "Sairindhri is free," they said, "and Kichaka's kinsmen slain. She is beautiful, and will tempt others, for men are lustful. Do what you think is best, sire."

Filled with fear, Virata addressed his queen Sudeshna: "When she returns, tell her to leave our kingdom. I would tell her myself, but I do not wish to offend her, for she is protected by fierce gandharvas."

Washing herself and her clothes, Draupadi entered the palace. "Leave us," Sudeshna said to her.

"Let me stay only thirteen more days here, my lady," Draupadi said. "Then my gandharva husbands will come and take me away, and remember your kindness forever."

Meanwhile, Duryodhana's spies, having combed every village and kingdom for a sign of the Pandavas, reported to Duryodhana: "They are nowhere in the forests, sire. But a few days ago mysterious gandharvas attacked and killed Kichaka and his kinsmen in the kingdom of Virata."

Duryodhana reflected: "Time is running short. What shall we do?"

"Who knows what's happened to them?" Karna said. "Perhaps wild beasts have eaten them, perhaps they died in an accident, perhaps they have crossed the ocean. Let us forget them."

The king of Trigarta, Susharman, often defeated in battle by Kichaka, said: "If the gandharvas have killed Kichaka, let us attack and annex the corn-rich kingdom of Virata, who is now helpless."

On the seventh day of the dark lunar fortnight, the Kaurava kings set out in two divisions to steal cattle from Virata as a preliminary to an all-out take-over. They attacked on the day the period of exile of the Pandavas ended. Virata's forces, marching out, clashed with the Kaurava armies in the evening.

Virata's horses and charioteer were killed, and he taken prisoner by Susharman and his brother. Commanded by Yudhishthira, Bhima rushed to the rescue; he was about to uproot a giant tree to wield as a mace when Yudhishthira stopped him. "No, it would give us away. Fight like the others, with a bow and arrows, sword and battle axe!"

Virata's son, Uttara, leapt bravely into battle. Yudhishthira slew a thousand, and Bhima seven thousand of the enemy; and Susharman fled. Bhima shouted:

"Running, O Susharman, stealer of cattle, victor of Virata?"

Susharman turned, Bhima leaped from his chariot, seized him by the hair, flung him violently to the ground, and kicked him in the head before sitting astraddle on his chest.

"Beg for mercy, Susharman!" he shouted.

"Let him go," said Yudhishthira.

Ashamed, Susharman left the field, and Virata distributed honours on the five brothers. "Live in my kingdom and enjoy all I can give you—wealth, women, whatever pleases you."

But Duryodhana and his followers attacked while the fleeing soldiers of Susharman were being rounded up, and made off with sixty thousand head of cattle. Loud was the lamentation of the cowherds when they reported the loss to the capital.

"All I need is a charioteer," said Uttara, "to go for the enemy."

Arjuna asked Draupadi to speak on his behalf.

"A eunuch shall be my charioteer," said Uttara, "only because you recommend him, Sairindhri. But I will not ask him."

"Tell your sister to ask him," said Draupadi.

So Uttara told his sister, and she went. Slender-waisted like a wasp and close-thighed, splendid like Lakshmi herself, she stood before Arjuna: "Sairindhri has spoken highly of your skill to my brother Uttara. You used to be Arjuna's charioteer, she said. Help us."

The palace ladies giggled as he went, saying, "Bring us dolls from the battle, O Brihannala, and pretty dresses."

"Trust me!" said Arjuna.

But when Uttara saw the mighty host of Karna, Duryodhana, Drona and Ashvatthaman lined up against him, and the kicked-up dust obscuring the sky, he trembled and said to Arjuna, "I cannot do it. I am afraid. Let me become a laughing stock. Let my cattle be stolen, my city destroyed." Giving up honour and pride, he cast aside his bow and arrows.

"You are a Kshatriya Behave like one," said Arjuna. "Even death is better than cowardice." And even as Uttara ran, Arjuna ran after him, his pigtail flying, and his red dress flapping about him. And some soldiers laughed, not knowing it was Arjuna.

Uttara had not taken a hundred steps when Arjuna caught up with him. "Come with me," he said.

Taking him to the *sami* tree, Arjuna said, "Climb up quickly. The weapons of the Pandavas are hidden in the topmost branches. Bring them down, along with the Gandiva bow."

"There is a corpse hanging there," Uttara said. "I will be defiled—I am a Kshatriya."

"Don't be silly," shouted Arjuna. "There's no corpse, and nothing will defile you. Get the weapons!"

Fearfully Uttara climbed, and brought down the shining weapons. "Whose bow is this," he asked, "decorated with sixty insects in gold design? These seven hundred steel-shafted and gold-headed arrows? This sword with the sign of the toad?"

"The bow is the Gandiva. It and the arrows are Arjuna's," said Arjuna. "The sword is Bhima's. The other weapons belong to Yudhishthira, Nakula, and Sahadeva."

"But where are they?" asked Uttara.

"I am Arjuna, disguised as Brihannala. Your father's dice player is Yudhishthira, the cook is Bhima, and looking after the horses and cows are Nakula and Sahadeva. Our wife Draupadi is the hairdresser Sairindhri."

"Where shall we attack? Command me, Arjuna—I will drive you there."

"Tie all the quivers to the chariot," said Arjuna, "and arm yourself with a golden sword."

In the meantime Duryodhana instructed his soldiers to guard the cattle, form ranks, and prepare for battle. "I have a feeling the thirteenth year has not been completed. We'll have Arjuna out, and get the Pandavas exiled another twelve years."

But Bhishma said, "Time's wheel revolves in *kalas*, *kasthas*, days, fortnights, months, planets, seasons and years. Two months are added every five years; in thirteen years will be added five months and twelve days. The exile period is over. Yudhishthira is no fool—he would never allow any Pandava to reveal himself within the exile period."

Arjuna moved his chariot towards their ranks, his banner flying and the twang of his Gandiva bow rising clear above the noise of the chariot wheels. "It is the ape banner," said Drona, "it is Arjuna. Look at the two arrows that fall at my feet and the two that whistled past my ears. He salutes me."

"Stop here," said Arjuna to Uttara. "Let me single out Duryodhana. . . . There's Drona and his son Ashvatthaman; there's Bhishma, Kripa, and Karna. I do not see him. . . . Turn around; let us find him."

At that moment Karna attacked, sending out a shower of arrows is Arjuna's direction. Arjuna shot a counter shower of crescent-shaped arrows with such fierce precision that Karna fled. Then the others, spearheaded by Duryodhana, fell on Arjuna where he stood, facing the lashing waves surging towards him, steady as an upright effulgent flame. Like hawks released by fowlers, his blood-drinking arrows shot into the sky. And there was blood everywhere, mixing with the rising dust, reddening the red sun. Arjuna shot seventy-three arrows at Drona, twelve at Duhshasana, three at Kripa, and a hundred at Duryodhana.

They replied with a cloud of gold-tipped, feathered arrows, which sailed across the sky like flocks of cranes. Drona was amazed at Arjuna's skill, and the soldiers stood and gasped at the swarms of locust arrows which hid the sky. Bhishma retreated, pierced in ten places, and Duryodhana moved in with a loud roar.

A snake-headed arrow from his fully-stretched bow grazed Arjuna's forehead; but he stood firm, like a proud mountain, while the blood trickled down his body like a garland of flowers. Angered, he fired a number of snake arrows at Duryodhana.

Vikarna, mounted on an elephent, charged down at him; and Arjuna aimed an arrow at the beast's temples. The elephant fell, like a cliff hit by lightning, and Vikarna jumped off in terror and ran eight hundred paces back to the shelter of a chariot.

Seeing the elephant topple, Duryodhana quickly turned his chariot and fled; but Arjuna followed and shouted, "Fight, Duryodhana! Let me see your famous bravery!"

Duryodhana turned, as a snake turns when crushed underfoot; so did the others, Bhishma, Drona, and Duhshasana; and they rushed at Arjuna in swelling waves. Like a crane piercing a cloud, Arjuna sliced through them, shooting his divine weapons right and left, deafening the four points with the terrible noise of his conch.

They stood paralysed, and their bows and arrows slipped from their hands.

"Go quickly," said Arjuna to Uttara, "while they are still in a state of shock, and get me the white dresses of Drona and Kripa, the blue of Duryodhana and Ashvatthaman, and the yellow of Karna. Bhishma is not paralysed. Skirt round his left."

Recovering, Duryodhana asked Bhishma, "Why didn't you shoot at Arjuna?"

Bhishma smiled. "I did not think mere noise would paralyse you."

When Uttara returned with the dresses, "Let us turn back," said Arjuna. "The cattle have been recovered, and the enemy routed." On the journey back to the capital Arjuna whispered to Uttara, "You are the only one who knows our identity. Keep it secret, lest your father become uneasy. Tell him you routed the Kauravas singlehanded, and singlehanded recovered the cattle."

The advance messengers sent by Uttara arrived in the capital with news of the victory, and Yudhishthira said, "I knew it would be so. No one loses who has Brihannala as charioteer."

Virata ordered princes, courtiers, musicians and courtesans to welcome his son to the city, and sent his daughter, accompanied by virgins and poets, to receive her brother.

Then he turned to Draupadi: "Bring the dice," and to Yudhishthira: "Let's see your skill, Kanka. Start the dice game."

"Gambling is dangerous sire," said Yudhishthira, "specially when there's excitement in the air. Haven't you heard of the fate of Yudhishthira, who lost his kingdom and his brothers? But if you order it, I will play."

While they played, Virata said, "My son has routed the Kauravas."

"Why not?" said Yudhishthira. "Brihannala was his charioteer."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?" shouted Virata, angered. "Does my son need the help of a eunuch to win a battle? Don't you even have decent words in your mouth? I forgive you this time because I like you. Never speak those words to me again."

"Sire, it is the truth that Brihannala has no equal. He has vanquished the gods and the demons —why not the Kauravas."

Virata flung the dice in his face. Blood flowed from Yudhishthira's nose, but he cupped it in his hands, and looked at Draupadi, standing nearby. She brought him a golden jug full of water and he poured the blood in it.

In the meantime Uttara had entered the capital, applauded by the crowds of citizens. He sent a messenger to the king with the words: "Uttara, your son, waits with Brihannala at the gate for your permission to enter."

"They are both welcome, very welcome," said Virata.

But Yudhishthira whispered in the messenger's ears: "Only Uttara; not Brihannala. He will kill the king if he sees me bleeding."

As Uttara entered, he noticed Yudhishthira's bleeding nose.

"Who struck him, father?" he asked Virata.

"I did. He praised the eunuch more than my son."

"Oh, it is a terrible deed!" said Uttara. "Ask his forgiveness before the Brahmin curses you."

Virata rose, but Yudhishthira said, "It is all right, sire. I forgave you a long time ago."

The bleeding had stopped by the time Brihannala entered. Virata said to his son: "O Uttara, my son, your exploits give me such happiness! To rout so many of the bravest warriors without a single wound on your person! My enemies are all smashed. I feel a soft music in my ears."

"I did not recover the cattle, father, nor did I rout the Kauravas," said Uttara. "The son of a god stopped me as I was running away from the battlefield; he mounted my chariot, and slaughtered the enemy. He is the one. And when the battle was won, he disappeared. But he will return, either tomorrow or the day after—who knows when?"

On the third day, bathed and dressed in white, wearing numerous ornaments, the Pandavas entered the palace gates, Yudhishthira leading, like five elephants. They sat on thrones reserved for royal visitors, their persons shone like suns. Virata saw them refulgent in the council chamber, and shouted:

"You, Kanka, dice-player, what are you doing on a throne?"

Arjuna smiled. "Not this, but Indra's throne is where he should sit, for he is Yudhishthira, son of Pandu." And he pointed out his other brothers by name, Uttara corroborating.

"I have been guilty of a great wrong," said Virata to Uttara. "If you wish, I shall give my daughter to Arjuna."

A treaty was immediately signed between Yudhishthira and Virata, and Virata said to the Pandavas: "It is my good fortune that you have graced my kingdom. My kingdom and all that I have, I make over to you. And to Arjuna, I give the hand of my daughter."

Yudhishthira glanced at Arjuna, and Arjuna replied: "Sire, I accept her as my daughter-in-law. It will make a good alliance."

"Why not as your wife, Arjuna?" asked Virata.

"In the female quarters, disguised as Brihannala, I knew her well, and she looked upon me as her father. I was like a father to her during her puberty. It will not be right if I now make her my wife. People will talk, and doubt my purity. Let us say I am afraid of the gossip—but if she becomes the wife of my son Abhimanyu, who is loved by Krishna himself, all slander will be stilled."

Many kings from near and distant lands attended the marriage ceremony. Krishna gave female servants, dresses, and ornaments to each Pandava. Conches, cymbals, horns, and drums sounded in the palace; hundreds of deer and other animals were killed, wines and intoxicating juices gathered; poets recited praise of the dynasty, and mimes performed. Virata gave Abhimanyu seven thousand horses as speedy as the wind, two hundred elephants, and much gold; and after he had poured ghee on the sacred fire and paid his respects to the twice-born, he gave to the Pandavas his kingdom, his army, his treasury, and his loyalty.

The Fifth Book: War Preparations

After the nuptial celebrations that night, the Pandavas rested: they rose at dawn and met the visiting kings in the court of Virata. There Krishna said to them:

"The terms of Yudhishthira's agreement with Duryodhana are known to all of you. After losing the dice game, they went into exile for thirteen years, and though they could have taken their kingdom by force any time they wanted, they kept their word. Consider this well, O kings. A promise has been kept—the Pandavas have been truthful. Duryodhana's attitude in this matter is not known to us. I suggest therefore that an envoy be sent from our side—a man respectable, dependable, and virtuous—with a request to return Yudhishthira's half of the kingdom in accordance with the agreement."

"If the envoy is given gentle words to speak, I will support this move," said Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna. "War is not our object. Peace is. Where force fails, gentleness might work."

Satyaki stood up quickly. "What use is there in mincing words? On the same tree one branch bears fruit, another is barren. In the same family one man is brave, another timid. Why should Yudhishthira use gentleness? Why should he beg to receive what is his right to get? Either he is given his kingdom or we shall see that he takes it. With Arjuna on our side, we can't lose."

"Noble words," said Krishna, "and loyal sentiments, which we appreciate. But our first duty remains, and it is to conciliate; it would be foolish to adopt any other course. Let us then send them this message: If the Kauravas are prepared to make peace on honourable terms, excellent; if not, we are ready to adopt other means."

Draupada sent his own priest to the Kauravas with the message, and Arjuna went to Dvaraka with Krishna and Balarama. In the meantime, however, Duryodhana's spies brought him news of the conference in Virata's court. Taking with him a small body of picked soldiers, Duryodhana rushed to Dvaraka, arriving there the same day as Arjuna.

Duryodhana entered the room where Krishna was sleeping, and sat on a cushion near his head. Arjuna stood, with arms folded, at his feet. Krishna woke, and saw Arjuna; and Duryodhana said: "O Krishna, I entered the room first, seeking your help. You cannot refuse me."

"I know you entered first," said Krishna, "but my eyes fell on Arjuna first. Both of you shall get my help. The younger gets the first choice. Choose, Arjuna, between the strength of a hundred million soldiers, ready to fight, on the one hand, and me, hands tied, on the battlefield, on the other."

Arjuna chose Krishna, though Krishna had vowed to lay down his arms on the battlefield; and Duryodhana was delighted to have the strength of a hundred million soldiers on his side.

When Duryodhana left, Krishna asked: "Why did you pick me, knowing I would not fight?"

"I can handle the soldiers myself, O Krishna, if I have your presence to give me moral support. Some of your glory will surely rub off on me."

"I will be your charioteer," said Krishna. "You can depend on me."

Hearing that king Shalya, brother of Madri (mother of Nakula and Sahadeva) had camped with his army on an area of six square miles, Duryodhana went and paid him homage, and entertained him with the choicest meats and wines. Pleased, Shalya embraced Duryodhana, and said, "What can I do for you?"

"I want you as the leader of my armies," replied Duryodhana.

Soon after, Draupada's priest arrived in the Kaurava court, and was welcomed by Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, and Vidura.

"Sire," he said, "it is not for me to dwell on the common lineage of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. It is not for me to say that the kingdom should be equally divided between the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. But it is for me to say that dharma demands the return of what must be returned, that an agreement must be honoured."

"We are happy to hear all is well with the Pandavas," said Bhishma, "and happier that they seek peace with their cousins. All that you say is true and, because you are a Brahmin, you know how to put things well."

Karna angrily interrupted, "We know all this, O Brahmin. Who doesn't know all this? What is the point in repeating the obvious? If the Pandavas think they can pressurise Duryodhana into giving up half the kingdom, they are mistaken. If justice demands it, he will forsake the whole world, but no one pushes him around!"

"Big words, Karna," said Bhishma. "He got pushed around when Arjuna singlehanded repulsed all the six Kaurava heroes in Virata's kingdom. Listen to this Brahmin."

Dhritarashtra said, "I will think this over and decide what is best for all concerned." To the priest he said, "You can go; I will send Sanjaya with my reply."

To Sanjaya he said, "Go where the Pandavas are. Soothe them with sweet words. Enquire after their welfare. They have always been good and obedient, and they will begin to like us. See that no hostile or warlike word escapes your lips. Use your discretion, and be specially gentle to Krishna. They will do nothing unless he approves."

Sanjaya hurried to Upaplavya, and Yudhishthira said: "It pleases the eyes to see you again, Sanjaya. How is everyone in the palace? How are you?"

"I bring a message from King Dhritarashtra," said Sanjaya, "and I would advise you to listen to it carefully. He praises your honesty and humility, your wisdom and liberality. He says you always know what is the right thing to do. He knows that you consider an evil act to be a blot on the family honour, like a speck of collyrium on a white sheet. On his behalf, I prostrate myself before Krishna and Drupada. I beg that you act in a way that will bring prosperity to the family."

"But this is very strange, Sanjaya," said Yudhishthira. "What have I said or done that suggests I am a mischief-maker? Who doesn't know the dangers of war-mongering? Why should a man in his senses ever think of war? Why should the gods ever curse him so? You know the whole story of our relations with Duryodhana. We are still the same Pandavas. Friendship is still our hope. But Indraprastha must be returned to us."

"But why do you insist on this?" asked Sanjaya "Anger is a vicious drug; it goes to the head, and leads to ruin. Isn't patience better?"

"Patience is indeed better," replied Yudhishthira, "if you first decide who's right and who's wrong. But patience when vice pretends to be virtue, or virtue pretends to be vice, is out of place. Here is Krishna, who has advised many kings. Let him say if I am wrong. He sees both sides of the case. He is dear to us. Whatever he advises, I follow."

Krishna said, "It is my desire, Sanjaya, to witness the prosperity of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Can you deny that Yudhishthira has been greatly forbearing all these years? And can you deny that Duryodhana wants the entire kingdom for himself? Feelings are bound to run high in such a case. Do not get the idea, Sanjaya, that you know more of what is right and wrong than I or Yudhishthira.

"When the lustful Duhshasana dragged Draupadi into the assembly hall, none of the Kurus except Vidura said a word in protest. Instead, Karna taunted her, saying 'You are now a slave; you have no husbands to look after you; choose one of us as your lord.' Can you expect Arjuna ever to forget those words? And Duhshasana called the defeated Pandavas eunuchs.

"If Dhritarashtra and his hundred sons make up a forest, the five Pandavas are tigers in that forest. The forest hides the tigers, but without the tigers, the unprotected forest is easily cut down. Tell Dhritarashtra that our desire is to maintain peaceful relations."

"May peace and happiness attend you," said Sanjaya. "May your best wishes go with me."

"Go in peace, Sanjaya," added Yudhishthira. "And on my behalf tell Duryodhana: *Give me back my Indraprastha, or prepare for war.*"

Returning to Hastinapura with all possible speed, Sanjaya said to the palace guard: "Tell Dhritarashtra that I am here with important news. Hurry."

"Yudhishthira is well," reported Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra, "and wants his kingdom returned to him. I am tired, sire, give me leave to rest. Tomorrow, if you wish, I shall repeat the words of Yudhishthira to the conference of the Kauravas in the assembly hall."

Dhritarashtra summoned a court attendant. "Tell Vidura I wish to see him"

Vidura came and stood with folded palms before the King.

"Sanjaya is back, Vidura," said Dhritarashtra, "and tomorrow is the conference of the Kauravas. I am so nervous I cannot sleep. Peace has deserted me, my mind is whirling. What should I do?"

"Sire, sleep deserts a thief, a lustful man, a loser of all wealth, a failure, and a weakling attacked by a brave enemy. I trust, sire, none of these applies to your case. Are you covetous of others' wealth?"

"You are wise, you know best," replied Dhritarashtra.

"Yudhishthira has every virtue, yet you exiled him," said Vidura. "The man whose conscience makes him correct a crime of which no one is aware but he, is a remarkable person. Be remarkable, sire: give the Pandavas back the share of the kingdom that is rightfully theirs."

Next morning, eager to listen to Yudhishthira's message, the Kaurava princes filed into the assembly hall. The golden floor was washed with sandal water, and on it were placed ivory, marble, gold and wooden seats.

"In the presence of all these noble sons and princes, I command you, Sanjaya, to tell us exactly what Arjuna said to you."

"This is what Arjuna said, sire: If Duryodhana refuses to return our kingdom, he is blinded by the evil of some terrible karma, whose consequences he will soon enough reap."

"What about their army?" asked Dhritarashtra. "Tell us about the size of their army."

Sanjaya sighed deeply, seemed to swoon, and fell. Revived, he said:

"They have Dhristadyumna on their side. There is Bhima, who killed the rakshasa Hidimba, and rescued them from the burning lacquer house. There are Nakula and Sahadeva; there is Arjuna. There is Shikhandin, born as a daughter in Drupada's palace in order to destroy Bhishma who will not fight a woman, and changed now into a man by the power of a yaksha. All these, and many others . . . ."

"Knowing as you do the destructive power of the Gandiva bow, sire," added Sanjaya, "why are you moved by the words of your sons?"

"We are more than a match for all of them," said Duryodhana. "Are we a pack of cowards? Because they might kill us, shall we therefore run? Bhima and Krishna and Arjuna know me as the world's champion wielder of the mace. Ashvatthaman is skilled in the use of the finest weapons. Kripa, born in a bush, son of the great sage Gautama, cannot be killed. Divinely born also are his father and uncle, both on our side. Arjuna can't tackle them all. And look at Karna, who is Bhishma, Kripa, and Drona rolled in one when it comes to fighting. My soldiers comprise already ten *akshauhinis*. Yudhishthira has only seven. He hasn't a chance."

He turned to Sanjaya. "How does he feel with only seven *akshauhinis* against my ten?"

"Confident that he will win," answered Sanjaya.

"It pleases you to think so," Duryodhana said.

The other princes, who had been listening silently to the exchange between Duryodhana and Sanjaya, rose and left the assembly. After they had left, Dhritarashtra turned to Sanjaya.

"Now, Sanjaya, tell me, and do not hide anything: where do we stand? You know these things better than I do. Do we have a chance against the Pandavas?"

"I will not say a word to you in secret, sire," replied Sanjaya. "It is not my intention to breed more suspicion and bitterness. I shall reply to your question only in the presence of the noble Vyasa and Queen Gandhari."

Both were summoned, and in their presence Sanjaya spoke:

"Arjuna and Krishna are both divinely-born, as you know; Krishna's chakra is a miraculous weapon, and spreads illusion and confusion wherever it is hurled. I will say only this: If Krishna were placed on one scale, and the entire universe on the other, the balance would tip in his favour. For he is the lord of time and death, the creator of illusion, and revolver of the cosmic wheel."

"And how is it that you, Sanjaya, come upon this interesting piece of information?" asked Dhritarashtra.

"I know, and you don't," replied Sanjaya. "That is all. I don't expect fools to appreciate the divine glory of Krishna. But I know that he is the creator, he alone is Divinity, from him all things came and to him all things go."

"Still, Sanjaya, let us know how you have come to these conclusions," persisted Dhritarashtra.

"I have faith, and that is enough for me," replied Sanjaya. "I do not perform useless rituals and I am not deceived."

"Why don't you listen to what Sanjaya says?" Dhritarashtra asked Duryodhana.

"Not even if Krishna were to kill all mankind would he impress me," replied Duryodhana.

After Sanjaya's departure, Yudhishthira said to Krishna: "Now is friendship put-to the test. O Krishna, all our hopes are in you. Because you have been friendly to us, I have been courageous. Help us now."

"I have heard what Sanjaya said, and I have heard you," said Krishna. "You have dharma in your heart, and Duryodhana has enmity. Get a large army ready. Duryodhana is not going to part with the kingdom he won unjustly from you."

"But let us be gentle at first," said Bhima. "We shall fight only in the last resort."

Hearing Bhima speak in this fashion, as if a mountain had become weightless, or fire turned cold, Krishna smiled and fanned the ashes with his words. "You are a strange man, Bhima. Sometimes you can think of nothing except crushing the sons of Dhritarashtra. You laugh hysterically, you pass your days alone, you put your head between your knees, and get lost in yourself. Once you gripped your mace hard and, in the presence of all your brothers, solemnly vowed not to rest until you had killed Duryodhana. And now your heart palpitates, your knees tremble, and you are become a eunuch. Your brothers are drowning around you, and you speak like a mumbling cow."

"No, no, Krishna," said Bhima, "I didn't mean that. I am a warrior, and I know it. You make fun of me, Krishna, your cruel words open a pus-filled sore in me. It is not because I am afraid, but because I want to give my cousins a chance to save themselves that I said what I said."

"And I wasn't mocking you, Bhima," replied Krishna. "Just testing you. Never let anger destroy your presence of mind—learn to smile in the face of calamity."

Noticing Bhima arguing in favour of conciliation, Draupadi said tearfully:

"You know, Krishna, how they insulted me. They deserve no mercy. Punish them! Has any woman suffered as I have? I am the daughter of King Drupada, born from a holy sacrifice; I am the sister of Dhrishtadyumna who, Krishna, is your friend. I am the wife of the Pandavas—and I was dragged by the hair and insulted in front of all the assembled kings! I prayed to you then for help.

Shame on Arjuna, and shame on Bhima, who did not help in my deepest distress. If you care for me at all, let the fire of your anger fall on the sons of Dhritarashtra."

Sobbing, the lotus-eyed Draupadi walked up to Krishna, lifted her dark-blue, perfumed, wavy, snake-glossy braid in her left hand, and said:

"Look at this hair, Krishna! Look at it well, for this hair was seized by the evil Duhshasana! If Arjuna and Bhima will not avenge me, my old father will. My sons will. I will never know peace till the arm of Duhshasana is severed from his body and smashed. Thirteen years I have waited for that day, thirteen years I have nourished revenge in my heart. And now Bhima is suddenly become moral, and my heart breaks."

She broke into loud sobbing, and her fiery tears drenched her large breasts.

"Do not cry, Draupadi," said Krishna. "I promise you that even as you have wept, the ladies of the Kauravas will weep when their kinsmen perish in the great war. Consider them as dead, all those who deserve your anger."

He paused. "I will go to Dhritarashtra, and speak to him personally."

The night passed;
The sun rose in the east;
It was the season of dew,
Autumn was over.
The fertile earth blossomed with crops.
At such a time did Krishna leave.

Duryodhana received advance information of Krishna's mission from his spies. He went to Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and Sanjaya, and said:

"Such wonderful news! The great Krishna honours us with a visit on behalf of the Pandavas!"

Dhritarashtra said: "Order the citizens to receive him with the warmest of welcomes. Let flags and banners flutter on all the towers, let the roads be cleaned and watered."

Vidura said: "Sire, your years make you venerable, and what you say is respected by all. But I would advise sincerity instead of show. Let us refrain from trying to deceive Krishna. All this is nothing but deception. The Pandavas want only what is their right—and you do not, sire, in your heart intend giving them that; you would not give them even five villages."

"Put Krishna in prison when he comes here tomorrow, is my advice," said Duryodhana.

Deeply pained, Dhritarashtra said: "Never utter such words in my presence again. He comes as an envoy. What harm has he done us that we should arrest him?"

Leaving at daybreak, Krishna arrived in Hastinapura; not a single citizen—man, woman, or child—remained indoors when he entered the city. His chariot inched slowly through the welcoming multitude till he reached the ash-coloured palace of Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra directed him to a gold-and-jewel seat of exquisite workmanship, on which he reclined while priests brought him offerings of a cow, honey and curds, and water, part of the customary ritual of hospitality.

Duryodhana invited him to dine at the palace. Krishna refused.

"Why do you refuse my hospitality, Krishna?" Duryodhana asked gently but maliciously. "Don't you wish us well? I had an idea that you were impartial."

Krishna raised his right arm, and replied in a cloud-booming voice, each syllable uttered with immaculate precision. "Perhaps you are unaware, Duryodhana, that envoys eat and accept honour only after their mission is successful."

"Success or failure is not the point, Krishna," said Duryodhana. "We are trying to please you, and you refuse to be pleased. We are trying to honour you, and you spurn our honour. We have no quarrel with you, Krishna. You have no reason to be rude with us."

Krishna looked straight at Duryodhana. "Neither desire, anger, malice, greed, nor love of argument sways me from the path of dharma. A man eats another's food when he is in need. I am not in need, nor have you given me cause to think that you have any special affection for me. I will dine with Vidura. I am honoured by your invitation, but I dine with Vidura."

After Krishna had finished his dinner, Vidura said to him: "Your visit is most untimely, Krishna. Duryodhana is in no mood to listen to good advice."

"Let me explain why I am here," Krishna said. "The cause is a noble one. Failing in a noble cause is merit enough. My conscience tells me I am doing the right thing, even if I come, as you say, at the wrong time."

The night passed, and the stars passed, while they discussed subtle and pleasing matters; and they were woken early in the morning by the voices of minstrels and poets chanting to the accompaniment of conches and cymbals. Krishna bathed, and went to the palace assembly room.

"I come here to arrange an honourable reconciliation between the cousins," he said to Dhritarashtra. "I have nothing else to say. I seek your benefit as well as theirs. Peace is the pressing need."

"What is the use of talk?" said Duryodhana, laughing and slapping his thigh. "I am what I am. What will happen, will happen."

Dhritarashtra turned to Krishna. "Your words are reasonable and noble. But I am helpless. You see my son's attitude. Persuade him if you can, for I am unable to influence him."

"Listen to me, Duryodhana, for what I say is for your benefit," Krishna said gently. "You are high-born and your family is renowned for its wisdom. Take my advice."

Dhritarashtra said quickly to Vidura, "Ask Gandhari to come here. She is wise and far-sighted. She might be able to move her son."

When she began to speak, Duryodhana sighed deeply; his eyes flashed with anger as she scolded him.

"Listen to the advice of your elders, my son," she said. "Give up greed. It can lead only to ruin."

Duryodhana rose, strode out of the palace, and went to Shakuni. He, Karna, Shakuni, and Duhshasana agreed that Krishna had come as a cover for a surprise attack by the Pandavas; that he should be forcibly held; that his imprisonment would unnerve the Pandavas and render them powerless, like a fangless snake.

But Satyaki, Krishna's kinsman, overheard them, and instructed a body of soldiers to stand guard outside the palace while he went in and informed Krishna, Dhritarashtra, and Vidura of the plot.

"Order Duryodhana to come here," Dhritarashtra said to Vidura. "I will make one more attempt to dissuade my greedy son."

When Duryodhana entered, along with the other princes, Dhritarashtra said: "Self-seeking wretch! You cry for the moon like a baby, and you seek to imprison Krishna under my very nose! You fool, can't you see it's like trying to hold the wind in your hands?"

Krishna looked at the princes, and addressed Dhritarashtra, Drona, Bhishma, Kripa, Sanjaya and Vidura:

"You have seen all that has happened. You have seen Duryodhana walk out in anger. You have been Dhritarashtra's helplessness. It is time for me to take my leave."

He mounted his white chariot and drove off to meet his aunt, Kunti, mother of Yudhishthira, Arjuna and Bhima.

"Tell Arjuna," said Kunti to Krishna, "that at the time of his birth, a divine voice spoke sweetly out of the sky, saying, 'Kunti, your son will excel even Indra. He will defeat the Kauravas, conquer the world, and his fame will reach heaven itself.' Remind him, Krishna, of the cruel treatment of Draupadi by Duhshasana. Tell him that I am well. Look after him, Krishna."

Bowing to and half-circling her, Krishna strode out of her house like a majestic lion and, taking Karna with him, left the palace of Dhritarashtra.

"Karna," he said gently, "you have studied the Vedas. You are a son born to an unmarried virgin, but you know the scriptures say that such a son must accept as father any man who marries the mother. Your mother is Kunti, you are Pandu's son, his eldest son, born before Yudhishthira. Let me tell this to the Pandavas; they will fall at your feet and give you all the respect you deserve. Draupadi will become your wife, and Kunti will be happy. Accept the Pandavas as your brothers."

"I know I am morally Pandu's son," replied Karna. "As a virgin, my mother bore me from her union with Surya, the sun god. But she cast me away from her, and the charioteer Adhiratha found me and brought me up. That day love for me filled his wife Radha's breasts with milk. She suckled me; she cleaned my urine and my stools. She is my mother. No, Krishna, I cannot now turn back on them. And I am loyal to Duryodhana and I will meet Arjuna in single combat on the battlefield. Neither fear, nor temptation, neither family ties nor death can alter my decision.

"I had a dream once, Krishna, of Yudhishthira and his brothers, dressed in white robes and seated on white thrones in a palace that had a thousand columns. And I saw you in that dream, busy scattering weapons of war on the blood-red earth. Then I saw Yudhishthira standing on a heap of bones, gladly licking thick sweet curd from a golden plate, and it looked to me as if he was swallowing the world you gave to him. I saw Bhima too, mace in hand, straddling a mountain. And Nakula and Sahadeva, wearing white braclets, white garlands and white robes, sitting in chariots that rested on human shoulders. All the other kings in the dream had blood-red head-dresses, and Bhishma and Drona I saw were riding in camel-driven vehicles.

"I can see the omens of death when they come. If we come out of the great battle alive, Krishna, we will meet again; if not, we will meet in heaven. Till then—"

Karna pressed Krishna to his breast, got down from the chariot, and left; and Krishna sadly returned to the Pandavas and told them all that had happened.

Meanwhile, Vidura went to Kunti and said, "Sleep has deserted me. The King is blinded with pride, and Duryodhana will not listen; and the Pandavas are preparing for war."

Kunti sighed deeply. "What use is wealth when kinsmen perish?" She thought: *As a virgin I summoned the sun god who gave me Karna. Surely Karna will listen to me.*

On the banks of the Ganga, Kunti heard the Vedas chanted by her son, a man of compassion and truth. She stood behind him, patiently. He raised his arms and stood still, facing the east. She waited for his meditation to end.

The Vrishni lady, the Kaurava wife waited. She wilted in the sun's heat like a faded lotus garland. She sheltered in the shade of Karna's dress.

Disciplined Karna meditated till the sun's rays had heated his back. He turned. He saw Kunti. He folded his palms in *anjali*. He observed the custom. The proud and powerful son of Vikartana, finest of men of dharma, smiled as if surprised, and spoke to Kunti.

"I am Karna, son of Radha and Adhiratha. I bow to you. Why are you here? What can I do for you?"

Kunti replied, "You are Kunti's son, not Radha's. Adhiratha is not your father. You were not born a Suta. Please believe me. I was unmarried when I conceived you. You were the first life in my womb. My son, you were born in Kuntiraja's palace. O Karna, finest of fighters, the god Surya whose light makes all things visible is your father. Your birth is divine, my son. You were born in my father's palace with gold earrings and a skin-coat of mail, and you shone with glory."

She continued, "Because you do not know this, because you do not know who your brothers are, you serve Duryodhana. It is not right that you should do this, my son. According to dharma, the finest fruit of dharma is to earn the approval of one's father and mother by pleasing them. The majesty of Yudhishthira, which Arjuna protected once, has been usurped by Duryodhana. Recover it from his selfish hands, and be yourself majestic. Let all the Kauravas today see Karna and Arjuna, brother and brother, reconciled. May the wicked bow down! If, like Balarama and Krishna, Karna and Arjuna become one, what is there in the world that they will not be able to do? Surrounded by your five brothers, Karna, shine! Shine like Brahma on a dais at a great sacrifice, surrounded by the gods. You have all the talents, you are my eldest son. Don't say you are a Suta's son. You are the radiant son of Kunti."

Karna heard a loving voice issue from the distant disc of the sun—it was Surya speaking from paternal affection: "Kunti speaks the truth. Follow your mother's advice, Karna. Great good will come if you do."

But neither the words of his mother nor the voice of his father swayed firm-in-truth Karna from his resolve.

"Kshatriya lady," Karna said, "I do not agree with you that to do what you say is the door to dharma. The way you behaved with me was highly objectionable. Because of it, I suffered, my dignity suffered. Born a Kshatriya, I was deprived of Kshatriya rites because you treated me as you did. What enemy could have done worse? When I needed help, you gave me none. You deprived me of my *samskaras*. Now you need me, and so you come to me. You never cared for me as a mother. Now you come to me, because you need me."

Karna continued, "Who does not fear the alliance of Arjuna and Krishna? If I defect to the Pandavas, will they not say I did so out of fear? Till today, I had no brother. If, on the eve of battle, I join the Pandavas, what will all the Kshatriyas think of me? The sons of Dhritarashtra have accepted me, even offered me their puja. I have been happy with them. How can I desert them? They have declared war. They need my help. They respect me, as the Vasus respect Indra. They believe that my help will make them overcome their enemies. How can I disappoint them? I am the boat they plan to use to cross the vast ocean of war. How can I abandon them who have no other hope? Now is the time for Duryodhana's dependents to show their loyalty. This I will do, even at the risk of my life. There are men who accept food and shelter, but turn into scoundrels when the time for repayment comes. They betray the bread of their masters, they deceive the rajas they once served. For such rascals, there is neither this world nor the next. I have chosen the side of Duryodhana. I will fight your sons to the best of my ability. I will not play false."

Karna added, "I know your advice is sincere. I should take it with grace, like a good man. I cannot in these circumstances. Yet I will honour your feelings. I promise not to kill on the battlefield any of your sons whom I have in my power to kill—I mean Yudhishthira, Bhima, and the twins—all except Arjuna. In Yudhishthira's army, Arjuna alone is my equal. I will kill Arjuna, and enjoy the fruits of success. Or Arjuna will kill me—and that will be a glorious end too. Noble lady, in either case you will have five sons living. Either Karna survives—or, if Karna dies, Arjuna dies too."

Kunti heard these words of Karna and shook with grief. Trembling, she embraced him who was disciplined and firm and strong.

"Fate is all-powerful, Karna," she said. "What you say may well come true. The Kaurava race is doomed. You have promised the lives of four brothers. O foe-crushing hero, remember your promise when the missiles fly on the field of battle."

Kunti whispered, "May you prosper, my son."

Karna said, "So be it."

They parted, going different ways.

Yudhishthira's soldiers camped on a part of Kurukshetra that was flat, pleasant, and convenient for grass and fuel supplies.

Cemetries, burial places, temples and other holy grounds were avoided. In the morning, the great march began, until they came to the holy river Hiranvati which flows through Kurukshetra; here Krishna ordered a moat to be dug; and sentinels' tents pitched. Then the other tents were set up, some at great distance from each other in the interests of safety, some as lavish as palaces, and stocked amply with fuel, wine and food. Hundreds of artisans, doctors and surgeons came to the place. Each tent had an attached armoury, hill-shaped, of bows and arrows, breast-plates, battle axes, spears, swords, quivers, shafts and other weapons. Hundreds of hill-huge elephants could be seen, protected with steel casings from which projected sharp spikes. The allies of the Pandavas marched to the camp in large numbers.

Next day Duryodhana deployed his eleven *akshauhinis* by classifying them into crack, mediocre, and inferior divisions and placing them, respectively, in the lead, the centre and the rear of his battle formation. The army glittered: there were quiver-carrying chariots, protected by tiger skin and stiff leather on both sides, intended for javelin-throwers; there were quiver-carrying horses and elephants, which would throw long-handled spears, and quiver-carrying foot soldiers too, armed with short, heavy clubs, pots of inflammable oil, poisonous snakes, grease, and sand, short spears to which were attached small bells; there were machines for hurling tar, water, and stone; spiked clubs, plough poles, poisoned darts, and missiles that shot flaming gases. Each chariot, pulled by four of the best horses, carried a hundred bows; one driver managed the two lead horses, and a driver each was in charge of the two horses for the two side wheels. Seven warriors mounted each elephant, decorating them like jewels on a hill—two armed with hooks, two expert bowmen, two swordsmen, and one armed with a spear and trident. There were thousands of horses, all specially picked not to paw and scratch the ground with their forehooves. Each chariot was protected by ten elephants, each elephant by ten horses, each horse by ten foot-soldiers. In reserve were chariots, each protected by fifty elephants, with a hundred horses attached to each elephant, and seven foot-soldiers to each horse.

"An army's nothing but an ant-heap without a commander," said Duryodhana to Bhishma. "Without you, we are helpless."

"The Pandavas are as dear to me as you are," replied Bhishma, "but I have given you my word, and I will lead your army, on one condition—either Karna or I must lead the first attack, since Karna is always comparing his skill in arms to mine."

"As long as Bhishma is alive to fight, I will not take up arms," said Karna.

Duryodhana installed Bhishma as commander of the Kaurava forces to the accompaniment of music from thousands of drums and conchshells. From the cloudless sky blood fell and coagulated the red soil; storms broke out, elephants trumpeted, meteors flamed and died, and jackals howled.

Next morning, after purifying baths and offerings to Brahmins, Duryodhana's forces raised their banners, and marched out to battle.

Yudhishthira's army moved too, led by Dhristadyumna, the kings glittering like planets in the sky. His seventy thousand elephants were walking hills.

The soldiers shouted; drums roared; and conches blew in tens of thousands.

The Sixth Book:
Bhishma

The two armies stood ranged against each other like two agitated oceans at the end of a yuga. The Pandavas and the Kauravas agreed on rules of warfare for the various forms of combat. Soldiers would fight only similarly armed adversaries, and fight fairly in all situations. Those who broke ranks and fled would be spared. No soldier would take advantage of another's unpreparedness or panic. The following would be spared: a soldier begging for mercy; a soldier retreating or disarmed; charioteers, animals, supply-carrying groups, drummers and conch-blowers.

Seeing the armies arrayed for battle, Vyasa said to Dhritarashtra: "Time has run out for your sons and the warlike kings. If you wish to see them engaged in battle, I will grant you special vision."

"Who wishes to see kinsmen slaughtered, holy one!" said Dhritarashtra. "But I would nevertheless like to hear about the events of the battle."

"In that case, I endow Sanjaya with special powers. Nothing in the battle will escape his eyes, and he will report the course of events to you faithfully. There will be a great killing: all the omens declare it. Hawks and vultures, crows, herons, and cranes are perched ominously on tree-tops. I saw the sun, moon, and stars flaming simultaneously. I have seen day change imperceptibly into evening. The moon became invisible on the fifteenth night of the bright fortnight in October. Boars and cats cried fiercely, and temple deities vomited blood, sweated, and fainted. Cows gave birth to asses. Sons copulated with mothers, pregnant women and virgins gave birth to monsters. Beast fed on beast, and animals were born with three horns, four eyes, five legs, two tails, two heads, and two sets of genitals.

"Look at the crows perched on the flag-poles, crying *pakka-pakka*! Look at the elephants running wild, urinating and excreting on the field! The end of the world is at hand."

Dhritarashtra said, "So it was said, and so it will be."

When all preparations had been made, Duryodhana said to Duhshasana, "Instruct the chariots to protect Bhishma when they advance! Bhishma has vowed not to kill Shikhandin, who was a woman in a previous birth. We shall kill Shikhandin. But keep an eye on Bhishma. I don't want a jackal like Shikhandin slinking in and killing the lion Bhishma. Yudhamanyu guards Arjuna's left wheel, and Uttamaujas his right; Arjuna in turn guards Shikhandin. See that Shikhandin doesn't get a chance to get close to Bhishma."

The night passed amid loud shouts of "To arms! To arms!", the neighing of chariot horses, the clatter of wheels, the trumpetings of elephants, and the slapping of warriors' arm-pits. Next morning, the chariots shone like lightning-flecked clouds, and the banners waved like tongues of flame.

Yudhishthira said to Arjuna, "They are many, we are few. I recommend the needle-formation, but I leave the details to you, Arjuna."

"And the mighty Bhima will head our needle," said Arjuna. "He will scatter the enemy as a lion scatters small beasts."

The Pandava forces rolled ahead like the swift waves of the Ganga. To the west stood the ocean-roaring army of Duryodhana, a countless and fearful host led by Bhishma.

Yudhishthira quailed and said to Arjuna, "How will we ever defeat them, who have Bhishma at their head?"

"Krishna's on our side," replied Arjuna, "and we will conquer."

Yudhishthira ordered his army forward, saying, "My soldiers, fight fairly—and achieve heaven!" In the centre was Snikhandin, protected by Arjuna. Yuyudhana commanded the southern segment, and Yudhishthira led the elephants.

Reporting all this to Dhritarashtra, Sanjaya continued:

"Seeing the army of the Pandavas, Duryodhana went to his guru Drona, and said: 'Look at the vast army under the command of Dhrishtadyumna. And look at our army too—I give you the names of our commanders.' Bhishma, anxious to revive Duryodhana's spirits, blew fiercely on his conch, like a lion roaring.

"Arjuna saw, in both camps, his uncles and grandfathers, his brothers and cousins, his sons and grandsons, his friends, teachers, and acquaintances. He saw his kinsmen assembled for war, and pity stirred in him.

" 'I have seen my kinsmen gathered for war,' he said to Krishna. 'My mouth is dry with fear, my limbs refuse to obey me; trembling seizes me; my skin chafes, and the sacred bow slips from my hands. Nor can I stand erect; my mind whirls, and unholy omens appear before my eyes. In killing my brothers, Krishna, I cannot see anything noble—I do not want this victory, this glory, this happiness. What a terrible thing it is to kill brothers, and cast covetous eyes on their land. Let the sons of Dhritarashtra kill me. I will not protest. Better be killed than kill.'

"Arjuna flung away his bow and quiver,. and slumped down on the seat of his glittering chariot, heavy with sorrow.

"Krishna's words to Arjuna, whose mind was heavy with grief, and whose eyes were filled with tears of pity, were: 'Your sorrow, Arjuna, is unmanly and disgraceful. It stands in the way of heavenly fulfilment. Don't be a coward, Arjuna. It doesn't become you at all. Fling off your weakness and rise!'

" 'You mourn those, Arjuna, who do not deserve mourning. The learned mourn neither the living nor the dead. Yet, there is sense in what you say.'

" 'The untrue never is; the True never is not. The knowers of truth know this.'

" 'How utterly strange that bodies are said to be destroyed when the immutable, illimitable, and indestructible Atman lives on! Therefore, rise, Arjuna, and fight!'

" 'Whoever sees the Atman as slayer, and whoever sees it as slain, know nothing about the Atman. This does not slay; it is not slain. As a person throws away last year's clothes, and puts on a new garment, the embodied Atman throws away this lifetime's body and enters another that is new. The Atman is unmanifest, unknowable, and unchangeable.'

" 'Now you have this wisdom, Arjuna. Now you should not grieve.'

"Lucky are warriors who fight in a just war—for them it is an entry to heaven. But if you persist in being a coward, your dignity and your dharma are lost. The riders of the chariots will think you fled in fear. Isn't death preferable to dishonour? Your enemies will hurl insults at you. Arjuna, what could be more shameful!

" 'Die, and you go to heaven. Live, and the world is yours! Arise, Arjuna, and fight!'

" 'Your duty is to work, not to expect the fruits of work. Do not seek the rewards of what you do. Steady in Yoga, do whatever you *must* do. Give up attachment, be indifferent to both failure and success. Such stability is Yoga. A person whose wisdom is tranquil is closest to realisation.

"Arjuna asked, 'If, as you say, Krishna, knowledge excels action, why do you urge me to this terrible war? You bewilder me with confusing speech. Speak to me certainties.'

"Krishna replied, 'Work is superior to inaction. Inaction will not keep even the body together. Therefore, Arjuna, work—but work selflessly. If I did not work, the three worlds would crumble, judgements blur, chaos follow, and all beings perish.

" 'I satisfy all, whatever the form of worship, Arjuna. My path is the path all follow, in different ways.

" 'Though I am the creator of the four castes on the basis of guna and karma, I am not really their creator. For I have no eye on the fruits of action, which is why work does not fetter me.

" 'The ignorant, the disrespectful, and the disbelieving await ruin. The doubt-ridden man has no joy, neither in this world nor in the next Slice with the sword of knowledge this disbelief in the Atman. It is the product of ignorance. Find solace in discipline, and rise, Arjuna!

" 'Who sees me in all things, and all things in me, is never far from me, and I am never far from him. He treats delight and suffering everywhere as his own; he is the supreme yogi.'

"Arjuna said, 'You have told me this yoga of peace and unity of being, but my mind is restless, and I do not understand what you say. For the mind, Krishna, is powerful and fickle, violent and uncontrollable. Harnessing the mind is like harnessing the wind.'

" 'The mind is indeed all that you say, Arjuna,' said Krishna, 'but determination helps; and renunciation curbs it. Without determination, no one can reach Yoga.'

" 'What happens to the well-meaning man who does not succeed in Yoga, whose mind wanders, who loses control?' asked Arjuna. "Does he not plummet down, is he not doomed like a tattered cloud? Remove this doubt, Krishna—you know everything.'

"Krishna replied, 'He need not fear, Arjuna, neither now nor later. The struggle for good is never wasted.'

" 'There is nothing superior to me: the worlds depend on me, like pearls that depend on a string.

" 'The wicked and the ignorant are victims of maya, and do not worship me. There are four types of good men who worship me, Arjuna: the sorrowing, the truth-seeker, the seeker of joy, and the wise man. The wise man, steadfast, devoted to myself, is the best among these. I love the wise, Arjuna, and he is specially dear to me.

" 'Therefore, think of me—and fight!

" 'I shall tell you the profoundest of secrets, Arjuna, leading to perfection, for you are not cynical. This is the most perfect of sciences, and of salvations the supreme; this you shall understand immediately, and perform without difficulty. Disrespectful men, ignoring this, fail to attain me, and are doomed to fearful rebirth. Listen to my wisdom, Arjuna: I speak for your good, for you are a good listener.

" 'My invisible presence straddles the universe: all beings have life in me, but I am not in them.

" 'I am the deceit of the deceitful, and the strength of the strong. I am struggle, I am realisation, and I am the virtue of the virtuous. I am Krishna among the Yadavas, and Arjuna among the Pandavas; among poets I am Vyasa, among ascetics Ushana. I am the subtlety of the tactful, the silence of the secretive, and the wisdom of the wise. I am the germ of life; nothing animate or inanimate has existence without me.

" 'There is no limit to my divine glory; what you hear is only a fragment of my unfathomable prowess.'

" 'I have heard of your greatness,' said Arjuna, 'I have heard of the birth and death of creatures. And there is truth in your words, Krishna. Give me revelation! If you think me worthy, Krishna, give me revelation!'

"Krishna said, 'Look, Arjuna, at my divine forms, various-coloured, various-shaped, in a bewildering panorama. See glories never witnessed before. See the entire universe revolving in me—see whatever else you wish to see. I will grant you super-sensuous sight to behold it.

" 'Were a thousand suns to explode suddenly in the sky, their brilliance would only approximate the glory of the spectacle.'

"Arjuna exclaimed, 'I see all the gods in your body, O God, all variety of life. I see Brahma on the lotus; I see the saints and the nagas. I see your form stretching on every side—arms, stomachs, mouths, and eyes—without beginning, middle, or end I see your crown, your chakra, your mace, your gathered radiance covering the three worlds The sun and the moon are your eyes, the flame in your mouth burns the three worlds. I shake with fear, and the three worlds shake, seeing your awesome form. I see you reach the sky, glorious with colour, with mouths agape, and wide red eyes; and my heart knows fear, my steadfastness disappears. O Krishna, peace deserts me.

" 'Take pity, O God, lord of the three worlds. Seeing your mouths, vivid with teeth and glowing like fires on the day of dissolution, my head whirls. O Krishna, peace has deserted me. Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Dhritarashtra's sons, kings and warriors sweep into your mouth; between your teeth their heads protrude, dreadfully crushed. Like many small streams rushing to the ocean, like moths rushing to the fatal flame, these heroes rush into your flaming mouths. You chew the worlds in your flaming mouths, and lick your lips. Tell me who your are, O fiery-formed. O Krishna, have pity. How can I understand you?'

"Krishna replied, 'I am Kala, the supreme destroyer of the three worlds. Even if you refuse to fight, none of the soldiers will live. Wake up, Arjuna, and win glory. Destroy your enemies and enjoy their kingdom. Their death is ordained—you are only the immediate cause. All have already been killed by me. Fight! the day is yours!'

"Arjuna, shaking, prostrated himself before Krishna.

" 'It is in the fitness of things,' he said, 'that the world rejoices and sings your praise, the rakshasas run away in fear, and bands of devotees stand in silent supplication. Why shouldn't they? Why shouldn't they worship the creator of Brahma, the lord of Brahma, the infinite, the god of gods, the refuge of the three worlds?

" 'I worship you a thousand times, and a thousand times again, I bend my body to your glory, and I beg forgiveness of you, my lord! Be merciful to me, as a friend to a friend, a lover to his beloved, a father to his son. Let me see you with crown, mace, and chakra. I long to see you—O thousand-armed, show me your four-armed form!'

" 'My love shows you the supreme revelation, Arjuna,' said Krishna. 'None has seen this before. Neither study of the Vedas, sacrifices, gifts, ceremonies, nor the strictest penance will reveal me thus to any other. Forget your fear and bewilderment. Be glad of heart—and look!'

"Krishna graced Arjuna with a vision of his graceful form. Krishna gave Arjuna peace.

"Krishna said, 'Do your duty, Arjuna, as your nature dictates. All work fetters, as all fire gives smoke. Only selfless duty saves.

" 'Fix your mind on me. Surrender all deeds to me. All problems will be solved by my grace. Pride will lead only to your moral ruin. If, filled with pride, you say, "I will not fight," it is all in vain. You are foolish. Fight you will, your nature will make you fight. Your karma will make you fight. You will fight in spite of yourself.

" 'Doesn't the universe revolve like a magic wheel? Isn't Brahman the hub? Take shelter in him. His grace will save you.

" 'This is all the wisdom I can give you. Think it over. You are free to choose. I tell you all this because I love you. Have you listened carefully, Arjuna? Do you still have doubts?'

" 'No, no doubts, Krishna, thanks to your grace,' replied Arjuna. 'I am firm. I will fight. I will follow your advice.' "

Sanjaya said to Dhritarashtra, "This sacred dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna thrilled me. Every time I recall it, I horripilate, and joy overcomes me."

A great shout rose from the Pandava soldiers when Arjuna lifted up his Gandiva bow.

Yudhishthira quickly took off his armour, descended from his chariot, and with folded palms walked silently east across the field to where Bhishma stood. Arjuna stopped him: "Where are you going? They are our enemies." But Yudhishthira kept walking without a word.

Some of the Kaurava soldiers muttered among themselves, "He is a coward. He has deserted his brothers and is joining us."

Yudhishthira walked straight up to Bhishma, and saluted him, clasping his feet with both hands.

"You are my guru," said Yudhishthira, "I salute you. Give us permission to fight against you today; and give us your blessing."

Bhishma said, "If you had not come as you have, I would have cursed you. But now I am pleased. You have my blessing—fight, and be happy. Ask of me any boon you like, anything except victory. A man is the slave of wealth, though wealth is no one's slave. The wealth of the Kauravas binds me to them. I prattle like a eunuch . . . . But tell me, Yudhishthira, what do you want?"

"You are my guru, you know what is good for us. I want nothing that will interfere with the word you have given to the Kauravas."

"I want to help you," said Bhishma, "and I will also fight against the enemies of the Kauravas."

"In that case, noble Bhishma," said Yudhishthira, "tell us how we can defeat you in battle; for I know that you are invincible."

"There is none, not even among the gods, who can defeat me in battle," replied Bhishma.

"Tell me this: how is it possible to kill you?"

"It is not possible to kill me," replied Bhishma. "The time of my death has not come."

Yudhishthira accepted the words with a bend of his head, saluted Bhishma, and went to Drona, while the soldiers and his brothers watched.

"Invincible Drona, tell me how I can fight without blame, and how I may defeat my enemies."

"A man is the slave of wealth," replied Drona, "though wealth is no one's slave. Fight, and be happy. Ask of me any boon you like—anything except victory. You know that I will fight for the Kauravas, but I will pray for your success."

"This is the boon I ask: pray for my success, and fight for the Kauravas."

"Krishna is on your side," said Drona. "Where Krishna is, dharma is; where Krishna is, is victory."

"And one more thing: venerable guru, how is it possible to kill you in battle?"

Drona replied, "So long as I am alive, you cannot win the war."

"How is it possible to kill you?" repeated Yudhishthira.

"Not when I am fighting—no man alive has the power to kill me then. Try when I lay down my arms, and engage in Yoga on the battlefield. I will tell you when the time comes."

Yudhishthira went next to Kripa, repeated his salutation, and received the same blessing. He did the same to Shalya, king of the Madras, and received his blessing too.

"I ask only one favour, O Shalya," said Yudhishthira, "that you weaken the strength of Karna in battle."

"It shall be done," promised Shalya.

Yudhishthira returned to his camp. But Krishna went to Karna on the battlefield, and said: "I am told, Karna, that you will not fight as long as Bhishma is alive, because you hate him. Fight on our side until he dies. Join the Kauravas after his death if you like."

"Nothing will make me betray Duryodhana," replied Karna. "I have pledged my life to him."

Krishna returned to the Pandava camp.

Yudhishthira shouted: "On this field of battle, let the kings choose! He who wishes to join us, let him come now!"

Yuyutsu stepped forward cheerfully. "If you will accept me as an ally, I will fight on your side."

"We are honoured to accept you, Yuyutsu," said Yudhishthira, and Yuyutsu went over to the army of the Pandavas, to the beating of drums and cymbals.

The terrible war started just before noon. Lion-roars shattered the sky and earth. The twang of bowstrings was heard, the neighing of cavalry, the noise of grappling hooks on elephants, the cloud-roaring clatter of chariot wheels—a frightful cacophony. As the battle progressed, Bhishma, protected by five kings on both his flanks, pierced the Pandava defences. His palmyra banner waved in the wind. As he shot his fierce, broad-tipped arrows, he seemed to be dancing with joy in his chariot. Shot by him in their genitals, elephants trumpeted in pain. Abhimanyu, in a chariot pulled by tawny horses and flying a golden banner, sped towards him, shooting arrows at the five kings protecting his flanks. But Bhishma stood his ground, like a smokeless fire, like the centre of the sun at high noon, burning everything around it. Despairing cries rose from the Pandavas as Bhishma, pulling his bow so tight that it became almost a circle, rained poisoned arrows at them.

And when the sun set on the first day of the battle, the routed Pandava soldiers withdrew, leaving Bhishma in proud possession of the field.

Yudhishthira went to Krishna, followed by the Pandava kings and generals, and said, "He destroys us like fire destroying dry grass, like a flame licking up ghee. Help us, Krishna."

"Be patient," replied Krishna. "You know that Dhrishtadyumna is on your side, and it has been foretold Dhrishtadyumna will kill Drona. Shikhandin is on your side too, and he will kill Bhishma."

Dhrishtadyumna ordered a new battle formation called the Krauncha for the second day, and placed Arjuna in the spearhead. Arjuna's banner fluttered like a piece of white cloud, and his chariot's rainbow-coloured pennants waved in the wind.

Duryodhana ordered a counter array, spearheaded by Bhishma, who advanced with his soldiers like Indra himself. Seeing him coming towards the Pandava ranks, Arjuna said angrily to Krishna:

"Drive me to where he is. I will meet him in battle and kill him before he destroys us all."

"I will, Arjuna, but be careful," said Krishna.

With soldiers protecting his flanks, Arjuna advanced; and the battle began. Bhishma shot nine arrows at Arjuna; Arjuna replied with ten at first, then with a thousand-arrowed shower which fell on Bhishma like a thick net. But Bhishma pierced the net with arrows of his own, and the two continued to fight, well pleased with themselves, each competing with the other's skill.

When the sun set that day, Bhishma, smiling, turned to Drona, and said: "Krishna and Arjuna are determined to rout us; our soldiers are having a difficult time. Look at them scattering. Order the army to withdraw." Drona gave the order, and both armies withdrew as twilight set in.

On the third day of battle, the Kaurava army adopted the Garuda formation as part of its strategy. Bhishma led a sharp counter-attack. The battle was horrific: the twang of bows and the flapping of bowstrings against the leather finger-protectors combined to sound like hills breaking apart. The field was filled with shouts.

"Stop!"

"I am here!"

"This is the one!"

"Get back! Get back!"

"I am ready."

"Hit him!"

The golden coats of mail, the crowns, diadems, and standards clattered and fell like stones on stony ground. Heads fell; ornamented arms, chopped off, writhed in convulsions on the ground. Headless bodies stood transfixed on the battlefield, clutching their weapons, or holding drawn bows.

A reckless red river began to flow:
Its waters a mixture of flesh and blood,
Carcasses of elephants its rocks,
Vulture-eaten horses, men, and elephants its tributaries.
It ran to the ocean of the next world.

Never was such a battle heard of or spoken of. The littered corpses blocked the movements of the chariots, and the dead elephants lay like blue hills. Soldiers, as they fell, cried variously.

"My father!"
"Oh, mother!"
"O my friend!"
"Help me, help me!"
There were many other shouts heard.
"Come!"
"Try again!"
"Don't be a coward!"
"Where will you go?"
"Fight! I am with you."

In spite of this turmoil Bhishma continued to shoot arrows lightly and dexterously, creating horror in the Pandava ranks. His chariot, moving with the swiftness of a circle of fire, seemed to be everywhere. Once they saw him in the north; next moment he was in the south. He seemed to move in a multiplicity of illusion. Only the arrows he shot could be seen. The Pandavas were terrified. Hundreds of brave kings rushed like moths into Bhishma's destroying flame. Every arrow of his found its victim. With a single straight arrow he felled on elephant, even as a single streak of lightning shatters a hill.

The Pandavas were again routed. Shouts of ' Oh" and "Alas!" filled the air. Father slew son, and son slew father. The soldiers fled in terror, throwing away their armour, as confused as a herd of cows.

Krishna, delighed, said to Arjuna, "This is your chance. Strike Bhishma in the mêlée. Your soldiers have panicked; Yudhishthira's too."

"Drive my chariot to Bhishma," said Arjuna "I will strike him now."

Krishna drove the white-horsed chariot to where Bhishma stood, shining like the sun. Obscured by an arrowy shower from Bhishma, Arjuna's chariot was hidden from view, but Krishna, with great skill and patience, drove the wounded horses through. With his cloud-booming Gandiva bow, Arjuna shot Bhishma's bow out of his hands. Quickly Bhishma strung another—Arjuna shot that away also.

"Wonderful, Arjuna!" shouted Bhishma. "Wonderful! Most wonderful! It is a pleasure to fight you. Fight hard, Arjuna."

Krishna kept moving the chariot in swift circles in order to avoid the steady rain of arrows from Bhishma. Yet many struck both Krishna and Arjuna, till they looked like two roaring bulls with horn-scratches on their bodies.

Unable to contain himself, Krishna released the horses' reins, jumped down from the chariot, shouting to Arjuna,—"Today my divine chakra destroys Bhishma!" In his right arm whirled the sun-bright razor-edged chakra. The ground trembled as he rushed at Bhishma. The end of his yellow dress waved in the air like a sliver of lightning flashing from a cloud.

"Come," said Bhishma, "come, O god of gods, with your mace and sword and chakra. Slay me in my chariot! What can be nobler, Krishna, than death at your hands? My fame will spread in the three worlds."

Krishna shouted, "You are the root of today's great slaughter. Today you will see Duryodhana die, and dharma triumph."

"Fate is what it is," said Bhishma.

In the meantime, the long-armed Arjuna jumped off his chariot, ran swiftly to Krishna who was ten steps away from Bhishma, and held him with both hands. Krishna struggled to free himself. But Arjuna dragged him away, like a storm dragging a tree with it.

Arjuna bowed to him when he stopped struggling, and said, "Control your anger, O Krishna I swear that I will carry out my promises."

Satisfied, Krishna again climbed into the chariot, took up the reins, and blew loudly on his conch.

On the fourth day Bhima and his soldiers defeated the elephant division of the Kauravas; as the beasts fled in terror, like storm clouds whipped by a strong wind, the victorious Bhima stood in the centre of the field, like Shiva, the wielder of the trident, on a funeral pyre.

Duryodhana ordered a counter-attack, and the entire Kaurava force rushed at Bhima, shouting fiercely: the chariots, elephants and horses were like a restless sea on a full moon day, the countless foot-soldiers like a dust storm. But Bhima stood firm, like the shore defying the ocean, fighting off the attacks with his mace, hitting out at the kings who charged at him. Dragging soldiers from their chariots, he slew them with his mace: they looked like storm-crushed trees.

Duryodhana, smiling, shot three arrows which cut off Bhima's shining bow. Another arrow, fierce as Yama himself, struck Bhima in his chest. He sat down in great pain in his chariot, and fainted. Led by Abhimanyu, the Pandava soldiers sped to the rescue, showering arrows at Duryodhana till Bhima recovered. Vanquished in the battle with Ghatotkacha that followed, the Kauravas withdrew, in shame.

Another night passed; another sun rose. On the fifth day Bhishma deployed his army in the Alligator formation. The sixth day saw a great slaughter of cavalry and chariot-warriors, with Bhishma routing the Pandavas.

Covered with blood, the heroes retired to rest for the night, planning for the next day and praising each other's feats.

In the afternoon of the seventh day Yudhishthira displayed his skill in battle. When the sun disappeared behind the western hills, a river began flowing on the battlefield, with bloody waves. Jackals roamed the field, and hideous, howling spirits and rakshasas feasted on the corpses. The heroes retired, to pluck out arrows from their bodies, and wash their wounds with medicinal waters.

Poets chanted victory songs, and Brahmins offered prayers; skilled performers played on musical instruments. No one spoke of war. It was beautiful to see tired men, elephants, and horses sleeping in a common peace.

The eighth day saw a battle fought between Duryodhana and the rakshasa Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima. Defeated, Duryodhana went to Shakuni, Duhshasana, and Karna to devise means for killing the Pandavas in battle.

Riderless chariots, pulled by swift horses, ran helter-skelter on the battlefield. Fourteen thousand chariot-warriors, of great fame and noble birth, lay lifeless on the field, sent to the world of Yama by the death-dealing Bhishma. Everywhere was strewn the débris of war: thousands of chariots, their axles and wheels broken, their frames smashed; shining coats of mail beside mangled bodies of soldiers, axes, quivers, bows, swords, heads with earrings; leather finger-protectors, gloves, banners; elephants and horses.

Great was the confusion when Bhishma attacked; father slew son, son slew father, friend killed friend. Like bulls running amuck, the Pandavas fled in all directions.

"Strike now," said Krishna to Arjuna, "or it will be too late. Remember your promise to destroy the Kauravas."

"The hellish joys of a pyrrhic victory," said Arjuna, "and the sorrows of another forest exile—these are the alternatives. I will do what you advise. Drive my chariot to Bhishma, O Krishna."

The Pandavas, seeing Arjuna's chariot, rallied. An arrow from Arjuna cut Bhishma's bow in two; as Bhishma picked up another, Arjuna cut that too.

"Brilliant, Arjuna, brilliant!" shouted Bhishma, and let loose a fiery shower of arrows that baffled Arjuna.

Fearful of the outcome of a fight in which Arjuna showed less skill than Bhishma, Krishna jumped off the chariot and, roaring like a lion, ran towards Bhishma, his yellow silk dress flashing like lightning.

Bhishma picked up a large bow. "Come, honour me, O Krishna."

But Arjuna ran and encircled Krishna with his arms. Krishna continued to run, dragging Arjuna with him. Arjuna caught hold of his legs, bringing him down ten steps away from Bhishma.

"You promised not to fight," he said to Krishna. "I tell you, I'll kill him. What will people say? They'll call you a liar!"

Krishna rose and, without a word, went back and mounted the chariot. As the battle wore on, the ominous hour of twilight set in, and nothing could be seen in the haze. Yudhishthira withdrew his forces.

"Bhishma destroys my soldiers like an elephant trampling weeds," Yudhishthira said to Krishna. "What is the use of fighting? It's a hopeless battle. Let me retire to the forest. I am fed up of war. Look at Bhishma! We rush at him like insects plunging into a wall of flame."

"Go to Bhishma," said Krishna, "and ask him the means by which he can be killed. He cannot refuse to give you advice if you go and ask him personally. He is your guru."

The five Pandavas and Krishna left their armour and weapons outside and entered Bhishma's tent.

"You are welcome, Krishna," said Bhishma, "and you, Arjuna, Yudhishthira, and Bhima, and you, O twins. What brings you here? What wish do you want me to grant to make you happy?"

Yudhishthira replied gently, "How can we win the war? How will this senseless destruction end? Tell me the manner in which you can be killed. When you fight, your bow is drawn in a full circle. When you fight, you are resplendent like the sun."

"As long as I am alive," replied Bhishma, "you cannot win. As long as I have my large bow and weapons in my hands, even the gods and anti-gods, even Indra cannot harm me. But if I refuse to use my weapons, even the meanest soldier can kill me. I do not fight with a weaponless man, with an unhorsed warrior, with a bannerless chariot, with a coward, with a terror-stricken soldier, and with a woman. Fighting on your side is Shikhandin. Shikhandin was a woman—Amba—in his previous birth. The story of his birth is known to you. Let Arjuna keep Shikhandin in front of him when he attacks me—I will not use my weapons against a woman."

They honoured him and left. But Arjuna was struck with shame and said to Krishna, "He is my guru, Krishna. As a child I played on his lap; my dusty body soiled his dress in a hundred games that he played with me. When, as a child, I called him 'Father', he would reply, 'Not your father, Arjuna, but your father's father!' I cannot do it. How can I kill him? Never, never!"

Krishna said, "What about your promise, Arjuna? And are your words the words of a Kshatriya? What is written, will happen. All you should worry about is doing your duty."

"Very well," said Arjuna. "Let Shikhandin be placed in front of me. Let Shikhandin be the cause of Bhishma's death."

The ninth day passed with a great slaughter in the Pandava ranks. But on the tenth day, Bhishma said to himself: *I am tired of killing. I have no desire to live any more.*

Arjuna attacked, with Shikhandin protecting him, like a wild elephant charging at another. "Faster! Faster!" he urged Shikhandin. "Kill him now."

Shikhandin went near Bhishma and shot ten arrows at his chest. Bhishma looked at him with baleful, consuming eyes.

"Now!" said Arjuna. "You are the only one who's a match for him. Kill him!"

Ignoring Shikhandin's assaults, Bhishma concentrated his arrows on Arjuna. Duryodhana ordered his soldiers to divert Arjuna's attention. Even as Bhishma rushed at Arjuna with a divine weapon, Shikhandin, clad in armour, intercepted him; and Bhishma withdrew.

Baffled and enraged, Bhishma licked his lips, and threw a spear at Arjuna. Watching it come at him like a fiery thunderbolt, Arjuna fired five arrows at it; it splintered into five fragments on the ground.

"It is no use fighting," reflected Bhishma. "Krishna is helping Arjuna, and I have vowed not to harm Shikhandin. It is time for me to use the boon I was given when my father married Satyavati—the willing of my own death."

Even as he thought this, Shikhandin shot nine arrows at his chest, which he accepted standing stable as a mountain in an earthquake. Twenty-five of Arjuna's arrows pierced him, followed by hundreds of others, wounding him in all the vital parts of his body.

Bhishma turned to Duḥshasana, smiled, and said, "You can see these arrows are Arjuna's, not Shikhandin's—they fly in a straight, never-ending stream. They pierce my thickest armour; they are like a cold winter wind that cuts through a cow's skin. They cannot be Shikhandin's."

"Rush him!" shouted Yudhishthira. Shouting, the Pandava forces attacked Bhishma with spears, swords, axes, arrows, and lances.

The battle was fierce on the tenth day. Ten thousand Pandavas died.

There was not two fingers' space on Bhishma's body left unpierced. He fell from his chariot with his head facing east, even as the Kauravas watched, a little before sunset. He fell; the earth trembled. He lay there on a bed of arrows, his body not touching the ground. A cool rain fell. The sun was in its southern solstice. Voices from the sky shouted, "He is dead! Bhishma, the greatest of warriors, is slain!"

"No, I am alive!" said Bhishma.

Ganga, mother of Bhishma and daughter of the Himalayas, sent holy men in the forms of swans to her son. They rose from the lake of Manasa and gathered round him lying on a bed of arrows; they circled him, saying, "Why should he die at the time of the southern solstice?" and flew away to the south Bhishma turned his head in their direction, and said, "Never, O swans, will I die during the southern solstice, it is given to me to will my own time of death, and I will live until the sun declines in its northern solstice."

Both armies stopped fighting and, casting weapons aside, gathered round Bhishma. The Pandavas and Kauravas paid him their respects.

"Noble warriors, god-like heroes, you are welcome," Bhishma greeted them. His head drooped. "I need a pillow."

Many brought him pillows of the softest silk. Bhishma smiled.

"A hero's pillow," he said, "not these." He turned his head toward Arjuna. "My head droops, Arjuna. Give me a hero's pillow."

Arjuna quickly strung his bow, bowed to Bhishma, and said with his eyes, "A request from you is a command." He shot three arrows from the Gandiva bow to prop up Bhishma's head.

"Just what I wanted, Arjuna," said Bhishma, pleased. "So should all Kshatriyas sleep on the battlefield. I will sleep on this bed until the sun declines in his northern solstice. But when the sun in his swift, seven-horsed chariot proceeds north, I will bid farewell to life, like one dear friend bidding farewell to another. Dig a trench around me, O kings: I wish to be alone in my worship of the sun."

Doctors and surgeons, skilled in the art of plucking out arrows, arrived with instruments and medicines. But Bhishma said to Duryodhana, "Send them away with presents of gold. I have no need of doctors now. I have achieved the highest happiness of a Kshatriya. When you burn my body, burn it with the arrows."

Night came, and they continued to stand round him, while girls sprinkled sandalwood water, fried paddy and flowers on Bhishma.

He sighed like a snake, and asked for water. They brought him fruit juice and cold water. He turned to Arjuna.

"Arjuna, my mouth is dry. Give me water."

Arjuna climbed his chariot, and, stretching the Gandiva bow to its farthest extent, shot a mantra-inspired arrow just south of where Bhishma lay.

A jet of cool, pure and holy water gushed from the ground; which Bhishma drank.

"You see, Duryodhana," Bhishma said. "Who else can do what Arjuna did just now? Give up your anger. Stop this senseless war. Let the soldiers live. Give Indraprastha back to Yudhishthira. Let there be peace after Bhishma's death."

They returned to their camps. That night Karna came alone and fell at Bhishma's feet.

"I am Radha's son, Karna," he said, his voice choked with tears, "whom you never liked."

Bhishma lifted one arm, and embraced him lovingly.

"Kunti's son, not Radha's," said Bhishma. "I bear you no malice, Karna. I know you as a great warrior. If I spoke to you harshly in the Kaurava camp, it is because I thought you too arrogant. Why, you are Arjuna's equal. You fight fairly; you are devoted to Brahmins. Now I am dying, Karna: I bear you no illwill. If you bear me no malice also, listen to me: join the Pandavas; let the war end; let the soldiers live. The Pandavas are your own brothers Krishna is on their side. They cannot lose."

"I know they cannot lose," replied Karna. "And yet I must fight them. I have vowed this, and I cannot break my vow. I will fight cheerfully, as if doing my duty. I beg of you—give me permission to do so. If I have at any time hurt you by unkind word or deed, out of anger or negligence, forgive me, and give me leave to fight."

Bhishma said, "You have my permission. Fight without anger or hope of reward. I spoke to you as I did because peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas was my aim. And I have failed."

The Seventh Book: Drona

"Bhishma, our commander, experienced, brave, and learned, is about to die," said Duryodhana to Karna. "What good is an army without a leader? It's a ship without a pilot, a chariot without a driver. Just as a merchant fares badly in a country of whose customs he is ignorant, a leaderless army only bungles along, exposed to various difficulties. Can you think of a leader?"

"Any one of us is fit to lead," replied Karna. "We are all brave, wise, high-born, and skilled in warfare. But Drona should lead us, for Drona is our teacher. There will be none jealous if Drona assumes command."

Duryodhana went to Drona and said, "Lead us, O Drona, like the son of the god of war leading the forces of heaven to victory. We will follow you, like bulls following their leader. Even Arjuna will not dare to attack if you become our general."

A great shout rose from the Kaurava ranks as Duryodhana said this.

"I know the Vedas and their six subsidiary texts," said Drona. "I know something about the psychology of human behaviour, and the use of special weapons. Since you put such faith in me, I accept charge of your army against the Pandavas."

On the eleventh day he wrought havoc in the Pandava ranks, shooting hundreds of arrows and careening through their close formations like Death himself. "What is it you want of me, Duryodhana?" he asked. "You have honoured me with the command of the army, and I give you a boon."

Duryodhana consulted Karna and Duhshasana and replied, "Seize Yudhishthira, and bring him alive before us."

"Why not his death? asked Drona. "Is it that you too have a secret admiring affection for him, because he is known as Ajatashatru, the One Without an Enemy? Yudhishthira will be captured alive, but on one condition—you must divert Arjuna from protecting him. Arjuna is my student—he has learnt too well from me. He has weapons given him by Indra and Rudra Engage him, and I promise to capture Yudhishthira alive."

When Drona attacked, a river began to flow on the field—
Its force was his wrath, its waves the soldiers,
Its waters the blood of dead warriors,

Its eddies the chariots, its banks the elephants and horses.
Its lilies were coats of mail, and pulpy flesh its mire,
Fallen helmets its froth, lances its fish.
The arrows were its swift currents, corpses its floating logs,
Chopped-off heads its scattered stones.
Only the brave crossed this river, the others cowered.
Chariot wheels were turtles, maces were crocodiles,
Arrows its swarms of small fish, umbrellas its swans,
Floating hair of corpses its weeds and vegetation.
It took hundreds to the house of Yama.
Vultures and fearful crows fed on it.

As Drona continued his slaughter, the Pandavas rallied under Yudhishthira and counter-attacked.

Arjuna moved forward, filling the sky with the noise of his chariot. His arrows flew over the river of blood, darkening the four directions, enveloping the sun like a cloud of fine dust. When night came, the armies of the Kauravas withdrew, and the Pandavas also retired to their tents.

The Kaurava kings distributed gold coins to Brahmins and loudly vowed that night to kill Arjuna.

If we fail to kill Arjuna tomorrow,
If we retreat in fear,
May the many regions of hell be ours,
The region for one who murders a Brahmin,
The region for the man who gets drunk,
Who sleeps with his guru's wife,
Who turns away a person asking for shelter,
Who seeks his wife's company during her period,
Who betrays trust and desecrates learning,
Who fights with a eunuch or abandons his mother,
The region for atheists, pyromaniacs, and cattle-
lifters.

They marched to the field, and summoned Arjuna to meet them in battle in the southern part.

"When I am challenged," Arjuna said to Yudhishthira, "I never refuse. That is my vow."

"It is a trick," said Yudhishthira. "Drona has vowed to capture me today."

"Satyajit will guard you in my absence," Arjuna said. "But if Satyajit is killed, my advice is that you withdraw from the battle immediately."

Picking up his conch, the golden Devadatta, Arjuna blew on it fiercely; the heavens echoed with the noise, and the chariot warriors stood petrified on the field. Their horses stood paralysed, with eyes wide open, and urinated, and vomited blood.

Stationed on his elephant, Bhagadatta let loose a stream of arrows in the direction of Arjuna and Krishna. Some of the finest—made of black iron, with gold feathers, whetted on stone—pierced Krishna and, passing like fire through his body, fell on the earth. The lances he hurled hit Arjuna's diadem.

Adjusting his diadem, Arjuna shouted at Bhagadatta, "Look well at this world before you die!", and fired seventy-two arrows at him. Though deeply wounded, Bhagadatta, undaunted, thrust a hook into his Vaishnava weapon, inspired it with mantras, and flung it at Arjuna.

But Krishna stepped forward and received the all-destroying weapon on his chest, where it turned into a victory garland.

Pained, Arjuna asked Krishna, "Why did you do this? You promised to be only my charioteer. Help me if you must when I am down, but not when I stand on my feet."

"This has a secret history behind it, Arjuna," replied Krishna. "I have four forms, into which I have divided myself for the good of the world. One is on the earth, practising meditation and discipline. Another keeps an eye on the tussle of good and evil in the world. A third, incarnated, works among men. A fourth sleeps for a thousand years. Naraka, the Earth's son, obtained a boon from me after I woke from a thousand-year sleep. I gave him the Vaishnava weapon which made him invincible. Bhagadatta got it from him. There is none, not even Indra and Shiva, immune to this weapon. Bhagadatta is defenceless now, and you are alive. Kill him quickly, even as I killed the anti-god Naraka for the good of the world."

Arjuna shot a long arrow between the enemy elephant's eyes; like lightning splitting a mountain, like a snake burrowing through an ant hill, it pierced through the beast's body. The elephant fell, The grief-stricken Pandava soldiers panicked and fled; and at the lovely twilight hour, jackals howled, the pale-red lotus sun sank low in the west, taking with him the splendour of swords, arrows, shields, and ornaments.

Having worshipped the gracious goddess of twilight, Krishna and Arjuna returned in their chariots to their camp, talking of the day's incidents and their various triumphs. They saw the other Pandavas sitting in silent grief.

"Your faces are strangely pale," said Arjuna. "And I do not see Abhimanyu here. He has not come to congratulate me. Where is my young, lovely-haired, gazelle-eyed, soft-spoken, smiling and obedient son? Why don't you speak? Is he dead? Does he lie on the field, bathed in blood, like a fallen sun? What will his mother Subhadra say? What will Draupadi say?"

Krishna consoled him, saying, "Death comes to all heroes who do not retreat from battle. Do not grieve. He has reached the regions of the blessed."

In a voice choked with sorrow, Arjuna said to his brothers: "I will destroy all of them—all their elephants, horses, and chariots! I will kill all of them—my son's murderers, their kinsmen, and their followers! Where were you when this happened? You are all brave warriors, you had weapons—how could they kill my son with you to protect him? Even Indra would not dare! If I had known you could not protect him, I would have looked after him myself. Have you no shame, have you no manliness? How could they dare to kill him in your very presence? I should have known you were all cowards, and stayed back."

He slumped down, holding his bow and sword. None looked at him as he sat there, sighing deeply, "My son," and wringing his hands; and looking about him with a madman's eyes.

"Tomorrow I will kill Jayadratha—I swear it!" he said.

He picked up his Gandiva bow and stretched it taut with both hands; the twanging noise filled the sky. Krishna blew his conch, the Panchajanya; Arjuna blew the Devadatta. The tremendous sound filled the four corners, the regions of the upper air, and the entire universe. The spies of Duryodhana heard the noise and reported the matter to Jayadratha, who rose, ashamed and worried, and went to the assembly of Kaurava kings.

"Arjuna seeks my death," he said. "I have no more desire to fight. I want to return to my kingdom. Give me permission to leave camp."

Duryodhana said, "We will protect you. I, Karna, Chitrasena, Shalya, Drona, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni and other kings will cover you wherever you go. Do not fear. All my eleven *akshauhinis* have orders to guard you."

That night, accompanied by Duryodhana, Jayadratha went to Drona, the general of the Kaurava forces, touched his feet, and sat down humbly.

"Tell me frankly who is better, I or Arjuna, in accuracy of aim, in lightness of hand, and in force of sword-stroke," he asked.

Drona replied: "I gave the same tuition to you and Arjuna. But Arjuna practised yoga and led a hard and disciplined life. He is the better one. But do not be afraid on that account. The gods themselves cannot harm a person whom I protect. I will form a battle array that Arjuna will be incapable of penetrating. Besides, you have performed many holy sacrifices. Death holds no terrors for you."

Next morning, there was din and clamour in the Kaurava camp: heroes stretching their bows, tightening bowstrings, shouting *Where is Arjuna?*, throwing their naked swords up and catching them in mid-air, whirling maces and clubs, shouting *Where is Krishna? Where is Bhima?*

Drona said to Jayadratha, "Take the son of Somadatta, Karna, Ashvatthaman, Shalya, Vrishasena, Kripa, a hundred thousand horses, sixty thousand chariots, fourteen thousand elephants, and assume position behind me at a distance of twelve miles."

Comforted, Jayadratha did as ordered.

Arjuna attacked fiercely and fearlessly, and pushed his way through line upon line of chariots and foot soldiers. Showers of arrows, maces and spears were hurled at him and, as an ocean absorbs hundreds of rivers flowing into it, he endured them all without flinching.

In the confusion Bhima noticed Karna concealed in his chariot; he jumped down from his chariot and seized Karna's flagstaff Enraged, Karna rose to fight. They roared at each other like summer clouds Bhima picked up chariot wheels, broken bones of elephants and horses, whatever he could lay his hands on, and hurled them at Karna. As he raised his hands to bring his clenched fists down on Karna's head, he remembered Arjuna's vow to kill Karna, and stopped. Karna, too, remembered his promise to Kunti and refrained from killing Bhima.

Striding toward him, Karna flicked his chest with the tip of his bow. Bhima snatched the bow and struck Karna's head with it. Eyes red with anger, but smiling, Karna said:

"Eunuch, fool, glutton! Fight with children, not with me! Go to feasts, not battles! Eat root, flower, and fruit, and be a monk. Order cooks and servants, not soldiers!"

Again he flicked Bhima's cheeks with his bow. "Go to Krishna and Arjuna, baby Bhima. They'll take care of you."

Krishna drove Arjuna to the scene of the wordy duel, and, as Arjuna shot a series of gold-tipped arrows at him, Karna fled.

"Now, O Krishna," Arjuna said, "take me to Jayadratha. We have very little time. The sun has begun his decline in the Asta hills."

Spreading havoc in the Kaurava ranks, Arjuna's chariot raced toward the boar-bannered Jayadratha. With two swift arrows shot simultaneously, he cut off the head of Jayadratha's driver and pierced the banner. The banner fell like a quenched fire.

The sun had started to set when Krishna turned to Arjuna and said, "Jayadratha is protected by six brave kings. Without defeating them you will not be able to kill him. I will use my magic yoga to give Jayadratha the impression that the sun has already set. He will think it safe to come out in the open. Strike him down then!"

"I will," said Arjuna.

Krishna's yoga spread darkness over the sun. The Kaurava soldiers stood with their heads craned forward for a last glimpse of the sun. Jayadratha stood in the same attitude.

Krishna turned to Arjuna. "He is looking at the dark sun. Now! Cut off his head! And see that it does not touch the ground, or your own head—as the curse says—will crack into a hundred fragments."

Licking his lips, Arjuna shot a mantra-inspired arrow at Jayadratha, an arrow that had been worshipped with perfumes and flowers. It sped swiftly, and severed Jayadratha's head as easily as a hawk scooping a sparrow from a tree top. Arjuna kept shooting arrows at the head, making it sail across the sky till it fell in the lap of king Vriddhakshatra, the father of Jayadratha. As also predicted by the curse, Vriddhakshatra's head shattered immediately into a hundred fragments.

Duryodhana said to Ashvatthaman, "The Pandavas begin to oppress us. Help us, O son of Drona. Destroy our enemies."

"What you say is true," said Ashvatthaman. "The Pandavas are dear to my father and to me. But this is war. And sentiment doesn't count in war."

From the Pandava side, Dhrishtadyumna was the first to attack.

"Fight me!" he shouted to Ashvatthaman. "Why pick on common soldiers?"

"Since you love death so much, come, let us fight," shouted back Ashvatthaman.

"Kill you?" shouted Dhrishtadyumna. "Before I kill you, I'll kill your father Drona. Call yourself a Brahmin, you cheap follower of Kshatriya practices?"

Both gambled on a battlefield, each playing his life as the stake.

Even as they fought, the forces of Yudhishthira and Bhima surrounded Ashvatthaman. Duryodhana moved in with his soldiers, and a fierce battle ensued. Men and animals fought till tiredness overtook them; the chariot warriors closed their eyes in exhaustion after the nine hours of bloody battle. At evening they became dispirited; many lay down and slept; others, drowsy, groped along and slashed at whoever came in front of them.

"All of you," shouted Arjuna, "all of you who are tired, sleep. . . when the sun rises, we shall again fight."

Both armies slept.
Some lay on horseback, some in chariots,
Some on the necks of elephants, some on the ground.
They slept with their armour on.
Drowsy elephants cooled the earth with sighs from deep-
    breathing trunks,
Spotted with battle dust.
Like hills they slept, their trunks hissing like snakes.
Gold-harnessed horses stamped hooves gently.

All was peace on the battlefield,
All still like a beautiful scene on canvas,
Painted by an expert hand.
The soldiers lying on the decorated heads of elephants
Slept like lovers on the breasts of lovely women.
Lord of lilies, the eye-delighting moon
Thrust his yellow rays in the elephant hide of night;
The yellow rays turned into gold,
Flooding the four quarters, the sky, and the earth,
Dispelling all darkness.
The sea of troops rose, wave upon wave,
Like lotuses expanding to the rays of the sun.
The battle re-commenced,
Warriors busily destroying the world in the hope of heaven.

Drona caused such great destruction in the Pandava ranks that they despaired of victory.

"He is invincible," said Krishna to Arjuna, "so long as he does not lay down his weapons. Forget dharma, and think of a ruse to make him do so. If his son Ashvatthaman dies, he will refuse to fight. Let someone announce to him that Ashvatthaman has been killed in battle."

Arjuna found the suggestion distasteful. Others approved of it. Yudhishthira accepted it after great hesitation.

Bhima felled a huge elephant named Ashvatthaman with his mace, and approached Drona.

"Ashvatthaman is dead!" he shouted in an embarrassed voice.

When he heard Bhima, Drona's limbs seemed to fail him, like sand in water. But he suspected a lie, knowing his son's valour, and he rallied his spirits. He fought fiercely, killing twenty thousand Panchala chariot-warriors, five hundred Matsyas, six thousand elephants and ten thousand horses.

Even as he fought, there appeared on the battlefield the forms of the holy sages Vishvamitra, Jamadagni, Bharadvaja, Gautama, Vasishtha, Kashyapa and Atri, together with all the descendants of Brighu and Angiras, eager to take Drona away to the region of Brahma.

"Be ashamed," they said. "You a Brahmin, and fighting! Lay aside your weapons. Remember the Vedas, follow the truth, return to the eternal path. The period of your life on earth is over."

Dispirited and grief-stricken, Drona turned to Yudhishthira, firm in the knowledge that Yudhishthira would not lie even for the sake of obtaining sovereignty over the three worlds.

"Is Ashvatthaman dead?" he asked.

Krishna said quickly to Yudhishthira, "If Drona survives another half a day, the Pandavas will be annihilated. A lie told to save life is not wrong. A lie in front of women, in marriages, to save cows, or to rescue a Brahmin, is not wrong."

"He will believe you though he did not believe me," replied Bhima. "All the three worlds know you are truthful."

Persuaded by Bhima and Krishna, and caught up in his fate, Yudhishthira, eager to win the war, decided to lie.

"Ashvatthaman is dead!" he shouted, adding in a whisper, "—the elephant."

Till that time, Yudhishthira's chariot always stayed the breadth of four fingers above the surface of the earth. Now it dropped, till chariot and horses touched the ground.

Drona, hearing of his son's death, lost all interest in the battle. At precisely that moment, Dhrishtadyumna rushed at him, fixing a fierce snake arrow in his bow, which flamed like a circle of fire. Drona prepared to baffle the arrow aimed at him, but his divine weapons failed him. Bhima rushed forward, took Dhrishtadyumna in his chariot, saying, "Now is the time. Kill him quickly," and shouted at Drona, "Your son is dead. Unknown to you, the son you loved so dearly is dead. Hasn't Yudhishthira told you he's dead? What is the use of fighting now?"

Drona said, "Karna, listen to me. Fight well. Let them not harm you. I am laying down my weapons."

He sat down in his chariot, and murmuring, "Ashvatthaman," devoted himself to yogic meditation. Dhrishtadyumna threw away his bow with the arrow still in it, picked up a sword, and ran toward him. His head slightly bent, his chest thrust forward, Drona meditated on Brahman, Truth, and Om. A transcendent radiance ascended from his body to the skies. Only five saw mahatma Drona leave the mortal world and enter the state of Brahman: Sanjaya, Arjuna, Ashvatthaman, Krishna, and Yudhishthira. The others had no knowledge of this; they thought Drona was still rapt in yoga.

Dhrishtadyumna ran toward Drona and, amid cries of *Alas*! and *Shame*! *Shame*!, with a single stroke lopped off Drona's head, and dragged the lifeless body behind him, whirling his sword in his right hand. A dark-skinned, white-haired, eightyfive year old guru, dead, who was once as active on the battlefield as any sixteen-year old.

As Dhrishtadyumna raised his sword, Arjuna had shouted: "No! don't kill him! He is our guru! Bring him back alive." But Dhrishtadyumna did not listen. Having killed Drona, he flung the bleeding head in front of the Pandava soldiers, who scattered in fear.

As they fled in all directions, Ashvatthaman arrived on the scene, like a crocodile pushing against a current, and a fierce battle took place.

"Ashvatthaman is furious," said Arjuna to Yudhishthira, "and the fault is yours. You told a lie for the sake of victory. The three worlds will speak of your infamous deed, just as they speak of Rama's treacherous slaying of Vali. And Drona must have thought, 'Yudhishthira is my student! Yudhishthira has every virtue! He will not lie.' You added the word 'elephant,' but your words were just a lie posing as truth. And I, wretched fool, I stood silent, I did not raise a finger to stop you! O the shame is mine too—it is my hell too!"

The kings and soldiers listened to Arjuna, without saying a word in approval or disapproval. But Bhima spoke up: "Bah, you prattle precepts like a saint in the woods. Are we Kshatriyas or not? Are we supposed to save ourselves or not? Forgiveness suits gods, Brahmins, and teachers, but we Kshatriyas have also our duties to perform. You speak like a fool."

Dhrishtadyumna added: "Have you forgotten what they did to Draupadi? The duties of a Brahmin are six—performance of ritual, teaching, charity, acceptance of gifts, assisting at ceremonies, and study of sacred texts. Where is it said that a Brahmin must fight? He used divine weapons to kill our soldiers. He was a fake Brahmin, using fake magic to deceive us. Good that he's been exposed today. He killed your friend Bhagadatta, and I killed him. What's wrong with killing an enemy? Stop blaming me and learn to fight! The war is still on."

The others remained silent, and Arjuna looked at Dhrishtadyumna out of the corner of his eyes. But Satyaki, trembling, breathed a snake-sigh, and picked up his mace.

"I will not bandy words with you, sinful rascal—I will kill you!" he shouted and rushed at Dhrishtadyumna.

Bhima grappled with him and seized his arms, but Satyaki dragged Bhima with him. They roared like two bulls, and it was with the greatest of difficulty that Yudhishthira finally pacified them.

The Eighth Book: Karna

With Drona dead, the sons of Dhritarashtra became pale and worried. Duryodhana tried to inspire them with these words: "I declared war because I had faith in your strength Yet now you seem to have given up all hope. Why? All warriors must die. All warriors know it is either victory or death that awaits them. Fight! Karna is still with us with his divine weapons. Fight! Arjuna is afraid of him, as a deer is afraid of a lion."

A conference was called; the Kauravas either sat like gods on luxurious couches or reclined on beds.

"What are your views in this matter, O kings?" asked Duryodhana. "Tell me what you think is necessary and required of us."

They made simultaneous gestures expressing their desire to continue the war.

"Desire, opportunity, skill, and strategy are recommended requirements for accomplishing anything," said Ashvatthaman. "But all these depend on fate. Many noble heroes in our ranks have been killed; yet we need not despair. With Karna to lead us, victory shall yet be ours. He is a mighty warrior, an invincible hero."

Duryodhana turned to Karna and said, "Karna, I know of your valour and I value your friendship. And I tell you frankly that I wish to take advantage of both. My best generals, Bhishma and Drona, have been killed in battle. Take their place, for I believe you are even stronger than they."

Karna said, "Once before I promised in your presence to vanquish the Pandavas and Krishna. I accept command of the army. Have no fear, and take the Pandavas as already dead."

The Kaurava forces formed ranks, and Karna appeared in the centre of the field with a gold-plated bow. His chariot shone like the sun; it flew a white flag, and many pennants. He blew loudly on his conch of gold filigree work, and shook the gold-plated bow proudly.

Yudhishthira saw Karna installed as commander and said to Arjuna: "Their bravest heroes are no more. Only Karna is left. If you kill him today, victory is definitely ours."

Both armies advanced, eager for battle. From the wings emerged the soldiers. First the skirmishes, then the battle.

The duel between Arjuna and Ashvatthaman resembled a tussle between two planets, both trying to orbit into the same constellation. Uttering loud roars, Ashvatthaman deluged Arjuna and Krishna with cloud-masses of arrows.

"Kill him the moment you find an opening," said Krishna to Arjuna. "Only death cures this disease."

Arjuna shot goat-eared arrows at Ashvatthaman's horses, and they galloped away, taking the chariot a great distance from the field. Thinking better of duelling with Arjuna, Ashvatthaman joined the forces of Karna, while Arjuna and Krishna moved to another part of the field to fight the hard-swearing soldiers called the Samshaptakas.

When the battle began, soldiers rushed at each other with clubs, axes, maces and pikes, shouting fiercely, striking blindly, falling and rising, jumping to attack, blood flowing out of their limbs, deprived of brains and eyes and weapons. Some lay on the ground in postures of death, their blood-stained teeth making their faces look as beautiful as pomegranates. Some fell like sandal trees cut down by the axe, spurting blood-red sap as they fell. Chariots destroyed chariots, elephants mauled elephants, men killed men, in thousands. Flags, banners, pennants, umbrellas, trunks, and human arms dropped on the earth. The faces of the dead were like crushed lotuses and faded garlands.

Some soldiers, tossed in the air by the trunks of elephants, were gored to death by the tusks as they fell. Others were trampled to death. Still others died, whirled high in the air like fans. Elephants fell like hills, mortally wounded by lances, spears and darts, their flanks ripped open, and their frontal lobes torn apart.

Hundreds of thousands of headless bodies lay on the field, their weapons and coats of mail drenched with blood, like cloth dyed crimson.

That night Karna went to Duryodhana "Today I shall fight Arjuna," he said. "Either he dies, or I die."

"Do what you think is right," remarked Duryodhana. "Our chariots, horses, bows and arrrows will support you." Next Duryodhana went to Shalya and said, "Illustrious King of the Madras, be Karna's charioteer in the battle. With you to help him, he will be invincible."

Three angry lines appeared on Shalya's brow. Waving his arms furiously, he said: "You insult me, son of Gandhari. Why should

I, who am superior to Karna in every way, be his charioteer?" He got up to leave.

But Duryodhana spoke sweetly and gently to him. "What you say is true: Karna is not your superior. But I never doubted your valour. It's just that I have a plan in mind, and I need your help. Why, you are greater even than Krishna, just as Karna is greater than Arjuna. Your knowledge of horses is twice that of Krishna's!"

"I am glad you say so in front of all these soldiers," said Shalya. "I will drive the horses, as you request, but I will do so on one condition: I will say whatever I like to Karna's face, if it so pleases me."

"Agreed," said Duryodhana in Karna's presence.

Shalya embraced Duryodhana. "Wish me good luck then, for I will fight with all my heart and obey all your commands. And let Karna not mind what escapes from my lips in the course of the battle. Pleasant or unpleasant, I shall mean it well."

Karna said, "Like Krishna to Arjuna, will you be to us."

"Four kinds of speech are never uttered by respectable men: self-rebuke, self-praise, malicious words about others, and flattery of others. But I shall praise myself in order to give you confidence. Where chariot-driving is concerned, in alertness, control anticipation and manoeuvrability, I am as good as Matali, the charioteer of Indra," said Shalya.

In the morning Karna said to Shalya, "Take me today to where I can do battle with the five Pandavas. I will destroy them!"

"You have a poor opinion of the Pandavas," said Shalya. "You forget they are brave, skilled and fearful adversaries. You will forget your words when you hear the thunderous twang of the Gandiva bow. When their arrow showers darken the sky, you will forget all that you say now."

"Urge the horses," said Karna. "To battle!"

Seeing Karna take up position on the field with Shalya as his charioteer, the Kaurava soldiers raised a great joyous cry. Cymbals and drums sounded as the army moved forward. Meteors blazed and thunder roared in the cloudless sky; fierce winds blew on the advancing host.

"Look at this wonderful spectacle," Karna said to Shalya. "Look at the array of might: the bows, the flags, the maces, the spears, the swords. The great god Death himself could not save Arjuna today if he tried. All the gods could not, if they tried."

"Your words are bold, Karna," Shalya said. "Might goes to your head and you say things you should not say."

"I have heard of the prowess of Arjuna and Krishna," said Karna, "and I am not impressed. Have you seen them in action? Or is all your praise hearsay? I suffer your bitter words because I promised not to mind. But I have work to do. I have a duty to perform for King Dhritarashtra. Forward!"

Arjuna stood in his chariot, pulled by pigeon-white horses, and surveyed the huge Pandava armies commanded by Dhrishtadyumna. Like swans rushing towards the sea, the Panchalas of the Pandava army attacked, but Karna quickly killed seventy-seven head warriors. Ten heroes on chariots surrounded him; these too he killed. Piercing the Pandava defences, he sped towards Yudhishthira, scattering all who blocked his way. His chariot shattered by Karna's onslaught, Yudhishthira climbed into another drawn by ivory-white horses with black tails, and withdrew.

Karna raced up alongside, and touched Yudhishthira with his palm, which was graced with the auspicious marks of the thunderbolt, umbrella, hook, fish, flag, tortoise, and conchshell, as if to seize him by force.

Karna remembered Kunti's words. He laughed mockingly and said to Yudhishthira:

"Running away, most noble Kshatriya? Perhaps you have forgotten the duties of a Kshatriya. After all, you perform rituals and study the Vedas. Run off, pretty son of Kunti, and don't bother us again. Don't use harsh words and don't fight big battles. Or use them against the Pandavas, but not against us. Run to Krishna and Arjuna. I don't kill people like you." He turned to Shalya. "Drive me to Bhima!"

Bhima saw him advancing and said to Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna: "Keep an eye on Yudhishthira He escaped death narrowly today." And he moved around, to face Karna.

"Bhima is angry," said Shalya to Karna. "Look at him, standing there like a monster, ready to vomit on you the wrath he has nourished for so many years."

An arrow from Karna sliced off the handle of Bhima's bow. His eyes blazing with anger and revenge, Bhima picked up another, fitted a mountain-piercing arrow to it, pulled the bowstring till it touched his ear, and shot it at Karna. Struck as if by a thunderbolt, Karna fell down unconscious in his chariot. Shalya drove the chariot away from the field.

Seeing Karna turn back, Duryodhana addressed his brothers: "Go quickly, cover his retreat. Save him from Bhima."

They rushed at Bhima with their soldiers, like insects into a fire. Bhima killed fifty chariot-warriors, and stood firm. The battle continued in dreadful confusion till high noon. The noise that rose from the clash of the armies was the noise of several oceans tumbling into each other.

Above the noise of the battle was heard the loud twang of Arjuna's Gandiva bow.

Duryodhana said to Karna, who had recovered, "The time has come. Let us attack now, taking advantage of the chaos."

Surveying the terrible slaughter, Krishna said to Arjuna:

Everywhere death.
Everywhere suffering.
An altar strewn with burnt-out fires.
Dead horses with arrows sticking from their bodies
Broken chariots with silent bells.
Wounded warriors wailing, their relatives weeping.
Soldiers running blindly on the field.
Some crying *Water*!, some dying drinking.

Karna shook his bow called the Vijaya, and looked about him, seeking single combat with Arjuna.

"What good is your army?" Yudhishthira said to Arjuna. "Karna lives. Are you afraid of him? Didn't you vow before us all in the Dvaita forest that you would singlehanded kill Karna? You have Krishna as your charioteer; you fly the monkey banner, your bow is six cubits long. What are you afraid of? Why not hand over your bow to Krishna, and let him do the job? Better the womb of Kunti had never conceived you than this shame! Better you had been born a five months' abortion than this shame!"

Arjuna drew his sword to kill Yudhishthira.

"Are you mad?" said Krishna. "Why do you draw your sword? Who is here that deserves death at your hands? I see no one.

What's the matter with you, that you brandish your sword so fiercely?"

Arjuna looked at Yudhishthira, breathed like an angered snake, and said: "I will kill anyone who says 'Hand over your Gandiva to another man.' I have vowed it! This king here said those words. I will not forgive him! I must be true to my vow. I have my principles. Tell me, Krishna, what must I do?"

"Be ashamed!" said Krishna. "Grow wiser. This is no time for angry keeping of vows. You talk of principles. What principle says you should take life? Ahimsa is the highest principle. Tell lies if you must, but never kill. Listen to me—I will tell you the highest morality of all. Truth is dharma. There is nothing higher than truth. But truth put in practice is a complex thing. What is truth? Some truth may not be uttered, some untruth is permissible. Sometimes truth becomes untruth, and untruth becomes truth. When life is in danger, when marriage is at stake, lying is permissible. When the loss of all one's property is involved, lying is permissible. For the enjoyment of a woman, for the sake of saving a Brahmin, lying is permissible. Untruth in these five cases becomes truth. Only a fool practises truth without knowing the difference between truth and untruth.

"It is better to lie in order to escape from thieves and robbers than stay with them by speaking the truth. Wealth given away to men who use it immorally doesn't enhance the nobility of the giver. Similarly, a lie for the sake of furthering dharma is not considered a lie.

"Now you know. Tell me, does Yudhishthira deserve death?"

Arjuna replied, "There is nothing in the three worlds that you do not know, O Krishna. My vow is my vow. Even Bhima has vowed to kill the man who calls him beardless. What should I do?"

"Yudhishthira was tired and excited when he said what he said," Krishna explained. "Karna had shamed him in battle. Go to him, touch his feet, speak respectfully to him. Soothe his hurt honour. He is wise; he will forgive you."

Arjuna threw away his bow and sheathed his sword.

"Forgive me," he said to Yudhishthira. "And now, let us return to battle. Karna bears down upon us."

This happened on the seventeenth day of the war.

That afternoon a fierce encounter took place between Bhima and Karna, who burst on the Pandava forces like a forest fire on dry grass in summer. Arjuna, sighting them, said to Krishna, "Drive me there. I see him in the distance."

Seeing Arjuna's chariot bearing down on them, Shalya warned Karna, "There he is, the white-horsed Arjuna. He is making straight towards us, avoiding battle with others. Show your skill now, Karna. None but you can save us. Kill him, for you are Bhishma's equal, and Drona's, and Kripa's!"

"Now you speak as you should always speak. Now your words sound pleasant in my ears," Karna said.

Even as he spoke, Duhshasana advanced towards Bhima in the mêlée, holding the reins of the chariot horses and shooting arrows simultaneously. One arrow, bright as the sun and studded with gold and diamonds, struck Bhima and knocked him unconscious in his chariot; he collapsed with outstretched arms. Quickly recovering, he stood up and rushed at Duhshasana with uplifted mace, shouting, "An arrow for me, a mace for you!" Perspiring like an elephant whose rutting juice trickles down his body, Bhima hurled the mace.

The impact of the mace knocked Duhshasana ten bow-lengths away from his smashed chariot. He lay on the ground in his crushed armour, writhing in pain. Bhima remembered the dragging of Draupadi by her hair, and his fury blazed up like fire fed with ghee. Before the very eyes of Duryodhana and Karna, he jumped down from his chariot, eyes fixed on the fallen Duhshasana. He drew his sharp sword, placed his foot on Duhshasana's throat, cut open the breast, and scooped the warm blood. He bent the body, and cut off the head. He sipped the blood, relishing each drop, and looking around him, said: "Sweeter than mother's milk or honey, sweeter than ghee or wine made from honey, sweeter than nectar is this blood."

He looked at the body, laughed softly, and said, "I am finished with you. Death came to you too quickly."

The soldiers were petrified with horror and fear. *This is no human being*, they thought. *This must be a rakshasa.*

Bhima bent down, cupped a little blood in his hands, and shouted in the presence of Karna and all the other warriors, "Once again I drink your blood! Dance now, Duhshasana, call us cows now! Now we dance around you."

Streaming with blood, he began to shout joyfully, as Indra shouted after killing the anti-god Vritra.

And Karna, for the first time, felt a great fear.

But he moved into battle, seeking out Arjuna. The two chariots advanced toward each other. Both Arjuna and Karna were clad in mail, carried swords, and had white horses and conches. Both had pink eyes and lion necks; both were golden garlands. Yak tails fanned them; white umbrellas shielded their heads. Like bulls, like maddened elephants, like poisonous snakes, they sought each other out; they looked like two mighty planets visible at the end of a world-destroying yuga. Proud, brave and skilful, they appeared on the field like the sun and the moon poised for battle. On Karna's banner was the symbol of the elephant's rope, on Arjuna's the open-jawed monkey displaying his horrendous teeth.

Karna, smiling, asked Shalya, "What will you do if, by any chance, Arjuna is able to kill me?"

"If you die, it will be my business to kill Arjuna and Krishna," replied Shalya.

"What will you do if Karna is able to kill me?" Arjuna asked Krishna.

Krishna smiled and replied, "The sun will fall, the earth shatter into a thousand fragments, and fire lose its heat before he kills you. But if he does, it is a sign that the end of the world has come. As for me, I shall kill him with my bare hands."

In the terrible duel, Karna discovered that Arjuna was a match for him. He fitted a snake-mouthed arrow to his bow—one that he had kept for such an emergency—an arrow much worshipped, encased in a golden quiver fragrant with sandal powder—and aimed it at Arjuna's head.

"This arrow won't do," said Shalya. "Choose another."

"Karna needs no second arrow," replied Karna.

It sped forward with a tremendous hiss, blazing a trail in the sky as clear and straight as the parting in a woman's tresses. Krishna saw it coming and, with great agility, stepped hard on the chariot. The horses bent their front legs as the chariot's speed dropped. The snake arrow shot Arjuna's renowned diadem from his head; the beautiful ornament shivered into pieces. The snake in the arrow returned to Karna, and said, "Shoot me again. This time look at me well, and shoot me straight. Arjuna will die."

"Who are you?" Karna asked the fierce snake form.

"An enemy of Arjuna," replied the snake. "He killed my mother, and I seek revenge. Shoot me, and victory is yours."

"Karna does not shoot the same arrow twice, not even to kill a hundred Arjunas. Karna seeks no outside help. I have other weapons, snake. Be happy. Go elsewhere."

The snake retraced its flight toward Arjuna. "This is the snake whose mother you killed in the Khandava forest," said Krishna. Arjuna fired six arrows at the flying snake, and the fragmented pieces fell on the ground. Then Krishna, with his arms, lifted the chariot to its normal position again.

With loud roars, Karna bore down on Arjuna. But Kala, lord of time, knowing the hour of Karna's death had come, approached him invisibly, and whispered in his ear: "The Earth is devouring your left wheel." Karna's chariot began to tilt, as the left wheel sank in the ground. Karna despaired and said, "The virtuous say Dharma protects the virtuous. But Dharma forsakes me now. Haven't I always practised dharma? I think Dharma is indifferent to his devotees."

Arjuna continued to harass Karna with fiery arrows. "Shoot high, Arjuna! Shoot high!" Krishna advised. "He baffles your low aim."

Karna jumped down to push his left wheel out, now totally embedded in the ground.

"Wait, Arjuna!" he shouted. "My left wheel is stuck You know the rules of battle."

Krishna said to Karna, "A good time to remind others of rules! Remember the insult to Draupadi, dragging her in her single dress among the assembled kings? What happened to rules then? Remember Shakuni cheating at dice? The kingdom of the Pandavas not returned after their exile, as was promised? Remember the burning of the lacquer house? Remember how you laughed at Draupadi when she stood in a single dress, insulted during her period? How you asked her to choose another husband? Remember the treacherous killing of Abhimanyu? What happened to rules then?"

Karna struggled with both hands to pull the wheel out.

"Kill him now. Cut off his head before he can get on his chariot," said Krishna.

Arjuna selected a terrible arrow, and saying, "May you carry Karna to the abode of Yama, god of death," he shot it.

Karna's head rolled on the ground. But the tall body stood erect on the field, blood flowing from its many wounds, like crimson streams running down a red chalk hill after a shower.

The Pandava soldiers blew their conches. Arjuna and Krishna blew theirs. Shalya withdrew from the field, on which lay the head of the noble Karna, with a face like a thousand-petalled lotus, belonging to a man as brave as thousand-eyed Indra, now dead like the thousand-rayed sun at night.

The Kaurava army, stupefied and afraid, scattered. When Dhritarashtra was given the news of Karna's death, he fell from his throne. So did Gandhari. Vidura and Sanjaya comforted him; the palace ladies consoled her.

The Ninth Book:
Shalya

After the death of Karna, Duryodhana was plunged in an ocean of sorrow; he could see only despair wherever he looked. Muttering *Hai, Karna*! *Hai, Karna*! he returned to his camp, followed by the remaining Kaurava kings. They passed that night on the battlefield at the foothills of the Himalayas, thinking of a better tomorrow. Among the assembled were Shalya, Chitrasena, Shakuni, Ashvatthaman, Kripa, Kritavarman, Jayatsena and other heroes.

"Let Shalya lead our army now," said Ashvatthaman. "There is none superior to him in birth, in bravery, and in handsomeness. Rejecting the sons of his own sister Madri, mother of Nakula and Sahadeva, he joined our forces."

"Whatever responsibility is given to me, I shall discharge to the best of my ability. My wealth, my kingdom, my life is at the service of the Kurus," said Shalya.

"I ask you to take command of our army," Duryodhana said.

"Gladly," replied Shalya. "I have a strategy that will baffle the Pandavas."

Without wasting time, Duryodhana poured holy water on Shalya's head, installing him as commander; loud roars of approval from the gathered soldiers greeted the ceremony.

The battle formation drawn up by Shalya on the eighteenth day of the war had Kritavarman on the left, surrounded by the Trigartas; on his right was Kripa, with the Shakas, Persians, and Greeks; in the rear was Ashvatthaman, leading the Kambojas; in the centre Duryodhana, protected by the pick of the soldiers. Eleven thousand chariots, ten thousand and seven hundred elephants, two hundred thousand cavalry, and three million foot soldiers made up the Kaurava forces. Six thousand chariots, six thousand elephants, ten thousand cavalry, and one million foot soldiers comprised the Pandava forces.

The battle began, as fierce as the one between gods and anti-gods. A river flowed on the battlefield: blood its waters, chariots its eddies, bones its pebbles, elephants and horses its rocks, fat and marrow its mire, umbrellas its swans, maces its rafts. Brave warriors crossed, on chariot-rafts, this terrible river that ran to the regions of the dead.

Attacking Yudhishthira, Shalya pressed hard with swift feathered arrows. Yudhishthira countered with a broad-headed arrow which shattered the flag pole of Shalya. "All the others, Bhishma, Drona, and Karna, are dead!" shouted Yudhishthira to Krishna and his brothers. "Shalya remains. Today he dies at my hands."

He picked up a gold-and-diamond encrusted dart, bright as the sun and, rolling his eyes fiercely, looked at Shalya with anger in his heart. Inspiring the weapon with many mantras, he hurled it with tremendous force. Shalya leapt, as if to catch the dart, as a tongue of flame leaps up to lick ghee thrown into it. But it pierced his chest and penetrated the ears and mouth; blood gushed from his fatal wound. He stretched his arms wide, and fell, facing Yudhishthira. Like a loving wife rising to welcome her dear husband on her breasts, the Earth seemed to rise a little to welcome Shalya, bull among men, as he fell, his limbs bathed with blood. He slept on her breasts as on a dear wife's, embracing her with all his limbs.

When Shalya fell, the Kaurava soldiers ran away in fear, as helpless as shipwrecked traders without rafts on a swollen sea. Two thousand elephants, goaded with hooks and chains, fled. Shakuni tried to rally them, shouting, "Fight! Fight, you fools! Fight, you immoral wretches."

As they rallied, Yudhishthira calmly said to Sahadeva, "There is Shakuni. Kill him! Take the chariots and cavalry and three thousand foot soldiers. I will divert their chariots."

Jackals howled in the field; vultures circled in the sky.

Shakuni threw a lance that grazed Sahadeva's forehead. An arrow from Sahadeva pierced Shakuni's bow, rendering it useless Shakuni hurled his sword, which Sahadeva splintered in mid-air with an arrow. Shakuni flung a mace, which missed. He next hurled the marvellous death-night dart, which Sahadeva cut in three pieces in mid-air with three gold-plated arrows. As they fell on the earth, the three fragments blazed like lightning flashes. Frightened, the Kaurava soldiers fled; Shakuni fled also.

Sahadeva pursued him, shooting stone-whetted and vulture-feathered arrows.

"Fight!" shouted Sahadeva. "Be a man! Remember the dice game, Shakuni? Today you get paid for that with a razor-tipped arrow that will slice your head off like a mango knocked off a tree with a stick."

Shakuni turned, lance in hand, and rushed at Sahadeva. The first arrow from Sahadeva cut off the lance; the next two lopped off Shakuni's muscular arms. Sahadeva roared with delight. A fourth broad-headed golden arrow decapitated the evil maker of Kaurava conspiracies.

Duryodhana looked around him and found the field empty; he saw only Pandavas everywhere, and his hopes fell. He decided to flee to Lake Dvaipayana.

Of the Pandava forces, two thousand chariots, seven hundred elephants, five thousand cavalry and ten thousand foot soldiers remained. Their commander Dhrishtadyumna bided his time.

In the Kaurava camp Kritavarman, Kripa and Ashvatthaman heard the victorious shouts of the Pandavas, and decided to go to Lake Dvaipayana Yudhishthira hunted in vain for Duryodhana. Mace in hand, Duryodhana had gone to the lake in advance of the others, solidified its water with his powers of illusion, and lay in hiding in the centre of the lake's bed.

The three kings addressed him in the lake: "Let us fight Yudhishthira. Our comrades are all dead. Let us kill him or die like them."

"It is good you are here," declared Duryodhana from the lake. "Let us rest a little and refresh ourselves; we will then fight better. You are tired. I am tired too. This is no time to fight. Let us rest here tonight. There will be time to fight better tomorrow."

Ashvatthaman said, "Arise. Fight now! I swear we shall win. I shall not remove my armour this night."

As they argued, a group of hunters came to the lake's edge, carrying their kill and desirous of quenching their thirst. They supplied a basketful of meat daily to Bhima. They heard the argument between Duryodhana and the three kings, and remembered that Yudhishthira had a little earlier enquired of them whether they had seen the four fugitive Kauravas.

"Let's go back and inform Yudhishthira that they are here," they whispered. "He will give us much gold. We'll tell Bhima too. He'll give us gold also. Slaving away like this, hunting and selling meat, is no way to live."

They picked up their baskets, and, creeping stealthily to the Pandava camp (because they were forbidden to enter the camp proper), supplied the information to Bhima, who rewarded them highly.

Bhima went to Yudhishthira. "The huntsmen have told me they are hiding in a solidified lake," The Pandavas, led by Yudhishthira, hurried to the lake. Though tired, they did not pause to rest, but pushed on singlemindedly.

Hearing the noise of the advancing soldiers, Asvatthaman said to Duryodhana, "I hear them coming. We are leaving this place."

"Go, take cover," Duryodhana said from his hiding place in the solidified waters.

Led by Kripa, they left, sadly, and went to a distant place, where they sat under a banyan's cool shade, full of anxiety, thinking *What will Duryodhana do? How will he/ survive?*

The Pandavas arrived at the lake and saw its enchanted waters. "He has created the illusion of solidity with his magical powers, and is hiding inside the lake," Yudhishthira told Krishna. "He thinks he is safe from mortal hands. But he shall not escape me!"

"Use your own magical powers," advised Krishna, "and destroy his. Illusion breaks illusion."

Yudhishthira smiled and addressed the lake: "Why do you hide in these waters, Duryodhana, after all the Kauravas have been annihilated? To save your own skin? Fight us! Where is your pride and sense of honour? They speak of you as a hero —false, all false! You are a Kshatriya. Remember your birth, and fight! Kill us and rule the world, or sleep forever, killed by us. Doesn't Brahma himself say fighting is a Kshatriya's highest duty?"

Duryodhana answered from within the waters: "Fear is everywhere, Yudhishthira. But do not think fear of you brought me here. My chariot was smashed, my quivers empty, my drivers killed. I needed rest Neither fear, nor sorrow, nor the desire to save my life brought me here. I am tired. You are tired too. Let us all rest. Tomorrow let us fight."

"We have rested enough," said Yudhishthira. "We have hunted long for you Come out, Duryodhana, fight with us."

"All my brothers are dead," said Duryodhana. "All dead, for whom I fought the war. The world is to me now like a widowed lady. I will fight you, when the need arises. Drona, Karna and Bhishma are dead. Enjoy the barren world—it is now yours. I have no interest in ruling without friends and allies. I will go to the woods and live there, dressed in deerskin. You have a world to yourself, a world without friends, horses, chariots, elephants, forts. Enjoy her."

"You rave like a madman," Yudhishthira shouted. "Your words do not touch my heart, as they did Shakuni's. How generous of you to make me a gift of the world now. I refuse to accept a gift. No Kshatriya accepts alms. I will fight you, and kill you, and then enjoy the world. It is typical of you to make a gift of that which no more belongs to you! You wronged us by taking away our kingdom, by plotting against us, and by insulting Draupadi. For all these reasons, you must die."

Duryodhana heard the bitter words of Yudhishthira, and breathed long, hot sighs. Gesticulating wildly with his arms, he answered:

"You have friends, chariots, animals. I am alone and weaponless. How can I fight against an army? Fight me alone, one by one. I am not afraid of any of you, not even of Krishna. Like the year meeting all the seasons, I shall meet you in battle. Like the sun expunging the light of the stars at dawn, I shall destroy you. And my debt to Drona, Bhishma, Karna and others shall be paid."

Yudhishthira said, "It is good you remember your duties as a Kshatriya. Good that you wish to fight; good that you will fight us all, one by one. Choose any among us for the first duel. You have the choice of weapons. And I promise you this: if you are able to kill any of the Pandava brothers, the kingdom will be yours again."

"I choose the mace I will fight on foot Let any among you who thinks he can kill me, step forward," said Duryodhana.

"Come out, Duryodhana," shouted Yudhishthira, "I will fight you first. And fight well; see that I do not kill you."

Unable to bear the taunt, Duryodhana breathed heavily in the waters like a snake in its hole. Pushing aside the waters violently, he rose with a rock-heavy gold-plated mace on his shoulder. The Pandavas laughed and shook each other's hands. Infuriated, he glanced at them from the corners of his eyes, furrowed his brow, and bit his lower lip.

"Mock me as much as you like," he said, "for today you die."

His blood-drenched body trembled, like a mountain shaking off its streams.

"One at a time," he challenged them. "And let the gods watch me fight single-handed, all of you. Let Yudhishthira decide if this is a fair fight."

"Was it a fair fight when Abhimanyu was killed?" exclaimed

Yudhishthira. "All of you knew your duties as Kshatriyas; why did many join hands to kill him? Dharma is easily forgotten in one's own crisis. Put on your armour; tie your hair; and get ready for the duel."

Duryodhana put on gilded armour and a helmet of pure gold. Standing like a shining golden cliff, he said to them: "I am ready. Come, any of you!"

Krishna whispered to Yudhishthira, "It was rash to promise him the kingdom if he defeats any of us. What will happen if he chooses you, Arjuna, Nakula or Sahadeva for the first duel? He practised with that mace on an iron statue for thirteen years Only Bhima's a match for him. But Bhima has brute strength, and Duryodhana has cunning. Cunning always wins over strength It was foolish of you to gamble away our advantage now, just as you gambled everything away to Shakuni."

"I will fight and kill him," said Bhima. "Mv mace is twice as heavy as his. Watch me!"

He turned to Duryodhana, standing like the mountain Kailasa, with his mace uplifted and said: "Remember all your ill deeds now, Duryodhana. Remember Varanavata. Remember Draupadi dragged by her tresses during her period. Remember Yudhishthira deceived at dice. And prepare to die!"

"You talk too much," Duryodhana said. "Why stand still and shout? I am here. I am ready. Let us fight! And fight fair, noble Bhima, or blame will attach to you. Don't stand there bellowing like a dry autumn cloud."

The elephants trumpeted, and the horses neighed.

With a great shout, Duryodhana rushed at Bhima. They met like two bulls clashing with their horns. The maces connected, and sparks like fireflies beautified the sky. They tired quickly, and rested briefly.

Warily they rose, and struck at each other like two cats fighting over a scrap of meat. Bhima turned; he circled, advanced, backed away. He feinted, stood still, jumped. They both moved in a circle, as if playing a game. Then they suddenly rushed like elephants at each other. As Bhima moved to the right of the mandala, Duryodhana struck him a glancing blow on one of his thighs. Bhima charged, like a lion against a wild elephant. Whirling his weapon, he dashed it against Duryodhana's thigh.

Duryodhana collapsed, but rose, supporting himself on his knees. Steadying himself, he lunged and hit Bhima on the forehead. Bhima did not move an inch, but stood mountain-firm. Blood trickled exquisitely down his temples. Quickly picking up his iron mace, he hit hard; Duryodhana trembled and fell like a giant *sal* tree uprooted in a storm. The Pandavas raised shouts of happiness.

But he recovered consciousness, rose like an elephant from a lake, and struck Bhima fiercely on the chest, smashing the armour.

They rested; and recommenced the duel.

Duryodhana hit hard again and, thinking Bhima had lost consciousness, waited for him to recover. But Bhima rushed furiously at him. Duryodhana leapt up in the Ashvatthaman manoeuvre. But Bhima flung his mace with all his might; it hit Duryodhana's thighs, and smashed them. Duryodhana fell. The earth reeled with the impact.

Fierce winds and dust storms began to blow. Trees and mountains trembled, and thunder roared. Showers of blood fell from the sky. A terrible noise came from the earth's bowels. Fearful headless monsters with many arms and legs danced on the ground. Lakes and wells vomited blood; rivers flowed in reverse directions.

The Pandavas shouted joyfully. Bhima stood above the fallen Duryodhana, and said: "You laughed at the disrobed Draupadi. You laughed and called us cows. Laugh now!"

He kicked Duryodhana's head.

"Who's a cow now? Who's sesame seeds without kernels now?"

He brandished his mace, and with his left foot kicked the prostrate Duryodhana's head. Not all the Pandava soldiers approved, but Bhima continued to dance and boast around the fallen body.

"No, Bhima," said Yudhishthira. "No kicking when he is down. He is king, he is your cousin. He has no friends, counsellors, or soldiers. He is finished. He deserves our pity."

Krishna's brother, Balarama, who had watched the encounter, spoke up:

"Shame on Bhima for hitting below the navel! This is not a fair fight!"

He rose and rushed at Bhima as if to strike him down, but Krishna pinioned his arms behind his back.

"The Pandavas are our friends. They are the children of our father's sister," Krishna said softly. "Bhima is only keeping the vow he made in the presence of Draupadi. Besides, the sage Maitreya cursed Duryodhana, declaring that his thighs would be broken. Calm yourself. The Kali Yuga is coming, the Age of Doom. Think of Bhima as one who kept his vow."

But Krishna's fallacious logic could not convince Balarama. "Duryodhana fought fairly. Bhima shall henceforth be known as a crooked warrior." He mounted his chariot and headed toward Dvaraka.

Krishna turned to Yudhishthira. "You are acquainted with all the rules of dharma. Why did you allow Bhima to kick him?"

"It pleased me as little as it pleases you," answered Yudhishthira. "This war does not please me. Nothing pleases me any more. But Bhima was thinking of our exile, the cruel words the Kurus had for us, and the way they cheated us at dice. So I did not interfere."

Bhima came and stood before Yudhishthira, his eyes expanding with joy, and paid his respects in the proper manner.

"All the quarrels over, all the thorns removed, the world is now ours to rule," Bhima said.

"The war is over, Duryodhana is helpless," said Yudhishthira. "With Krishna's help, we have won."

"Let us leave this place," said Krishna to the assembled soldiers. "What use is there in waiting here? The immoral Duryodhana deserves no sympathy. Why waste breath on a broken piece of wood?"

Duryodhana tried to rise, sat on his haunches, and looked bitterly at Krishna. He sat there like a poisonous snake without its tail.

"You forget, Krishna, that I was struck down unfairly," he said. "You were the one to hint to Bhima to smash my thighs. Do you think I did not notice Arjuna passing on your hint to Bhima? Be ashamed! Placing Shikhandin in front, you had Bhishma killed. You had an elephant killed, and you said Ashvatthaman was dead. Be ashamed, Krishna. And you had Karna cut down by Arjuna even as he tried to free his wheel from the ground. Did you think I did not know? My best kings have died because you stooped to the basest means to kill them."

"And you, Duryodhana?" asked Krishna. "By what means was the boy Abhimanyu killed? You are reaping the results of your ill deeds. You never paid attention to the advice of the sages Brihaspati and Ushanas. You never paid respects to the old. Insatiable greed and ambition possessed you."

Duryodhana replied: "I have studied, I have made presents as laid down in the scriptures. I have governed my kingdom carefully, and, like a true Kshatriya, I have desired death in battle. Enjoyments such as even the gods would envy have been mine. Who is so fortunate as myself? I, my younger brothers, and my allies are on our way to heaven. You, Krishna, must continue to live in this unhappy world"

A rain of fragrant celestial flowers fell on Duryodhana's head even as he spoke these words. The gandharvas played soft music, and the spirits of perfected sages chanted *Glory to Duryodhana*! Scented breezes blew on every side, and the sky was one vast lapis lazuli of blue.

The Pandavas looked at each other in shame. But Krishna, in a drum-booming voice, said, "They were great chariot warriors. All your bravery could not have defeated them. Duryodhana could never have been beaten in a fair fight. I meant well for you, so I used my powers of maya in many ways on the battlefield. If I hadn't, you would never have won the war. What's the use regretting that you defeated him unfairly? Deception's in order when the enemy's stronger. The gods themselves are not above it—we have only followed their example. It is evening, let us retire to our tents."

Blowing their conches, they left, leaving Duryodhana alone near the lake's edge. They went to the Kaurava camp first, and removed the treasure: gold, silver, gems, pearls, expensive ornaments, blankets and skins. They took away countless male and female slaves. They rested a little before they left for Hastinapura with the inexhaustible wealth, performing the initial act of auspicious battle-purification on the banks of the sacred stream Oghavati. They sent Krishna in advance to meet Dhritarashtra, and asked him specially to console the helpless Gandhari, who had lost all her sons in the battle.

Yudhishthira was greatly afraid and said to Krishna, "Gandhari will reduce us to ashes with the strength of her curse. She is a lady of great ascetic merit. Pacify her anger. You are the eternal refuge of the three worlds, you will know what reasons, subtle and simple, will comfort her."

The streets of Hastinapura resounded with the noise of his chariot wheels as Krishna entered. Alighting, he went straight to the palace, touched the feet of Dhritarashtra and Vyasa, and silently greeted Gandhari.

Holding Dhritarashtra's hand. he sobbed softly for a while; then, as the conventions indicated, he washed his eyes and face with water. Speaking sweetly and fluently, he said to Dhritarashtra:

"Whatever there is to know of past and future, you already know. Time holds no secret from you. The Pandavas tried, for your sake, to stop the war and prevent the carnage."

He turned to Gandhari, "Excellent lady, there is none like you in the world. I remember the advice you gave your sons in the palace assembly, advice they did not follow. You warned Duryodhana then that victory would attend on dharma. Excellent lady, victory has attended on dharma. Do not grieve. Do not desire to curse and destroy the Pandavas."

"What you say is true. O Krishna," replied Gandhari. "After hearing you, my heart is a little calmer. As for my husband, left without sons, you and the Pandavas will look after him—"

She stopped her loud weeping, and with her eye-bandage dried her tears. Krishna continued to comfort her with many subtle and simple arguments.

His thighs broken, his body covered with dust, Duryodhana looked around him, and sighed like a snake. He straightened his disheveled hair, and looked at Sanjaya, who had hurried to see him near the lake.

"Tell my parents, Sanjaya, that Bhima kicked me in the head as I lay helpless with smashed thighs," he said. "Tell my parents I performed all the rituals, looked after my servants, honoured my kinsmen, and was generous to all who deserved my affection. I conquered many enemies and made many kings my vassals. I pursued Dharma, Kama, and Wealth, studied the Vedas, and rode the finest horses. Tell them there is none more fortunate than I. And tell Ashvatthaman never to put trust in the words of the

Pandavas, violators of dharma, doers of immoral deeds. I am now finished. I am a moneyless traveller on life's road. I go now to join the illustrious Drona, Karna, Bhishma and other heroes in heaven."

Ashvatthaman, Kripa and Kritavarman, hearing of Duryodhana's fall from messengers, took the swiftest horses and hurried to him. They saw him prostrate, dust-covered and blood-drenched, like the sun fallen on earth, or the ocean dried by a great wind, or the full moon shrouded in mist.

Ashvatthaman said to him, "You, laid low? Truly is it said that all things pass and nothing remains. A king who ruled the world, now doomed to die near a lonely lake!"

Duryodhana wiped his eyes. "Death comes to all," he said to them. "It is Brahma's will. My time has come. But I fought well. I was a good Kshatriya. Do not grieve for me. You fought well and did your duties too."

Tears came to his eyes, and he stopped.

Ashvatthaman squeezed his hand, and said hoarsely."Listen to my vow! I swear by all my piety, by all the religious merits I have won, I swear by Truth itself to kill the Pandavas tonight. Give me leave, my lord, to do so."

Pleased, Duryodhana said to Kripa, "Bring me a clay pot filled with water."

When the pot was placed before him, "I install Ashvatthaman the new commander of the Kaurava forces," he said. "The scriptures permit a Brahmin, who adopts Kshatriya ways, to fight."

The ceremony over, Ashvatthaman embraced Duryodhana, and quickly left Duryodhana prepared to spend the fearful night there. The three heroes planned their counterattack as they made their way to the Pandava camp.

The Tenth Book: Night

At sunset they reached a spot not far from the camp, and released some of their horses. They were in great fear. Secretly they entered a wood in the precincts of the camp. Hearing shouts, they thought the Pandavas had come to search for them, and they quickly fled eastwards. Hate, revenge, and thirst overpowered them; and they took shelter in a dense forest abounding with creepers.

Birds and beasts crowded the forest,
Everywhere were lakes lovely with blue lotuses.
At a short distance was a gigantic banyan;
Here they set their horses free.
They cleaned and washed themselves, and said their evening
prayers.
The departing sun touched the Asta bills,
Night came, the mother of the universe,
The sky was a rich brocade decorated with stars.
Night prowlers howled, day beasts slept.
Under the banyan, heavy with sleep,
Kritavarman, Kripa, and Ashvatthaman sat.
The first two slept,
The bare ground their luxurious bed.
Anger kept Ashvatthaman awake,
He breathed like a snake, never closing his eyes.
He looked up and saw crows sleeping in the banyan,
Thousands of them, each in separate peace.
He saw a horrible owl suddenly appear,
Green-eyed, red-feathered, large-beaked, and long-taloned;
Crying softly, it swooped on the crows,
Tearing wings, slicing necks and slashing legs,
Killing hundreds of sleeping enemies.
The ground became black with their bodies;
And the owl was happy.

"This owl teaches me something," thought Ashvatthaman. For me to fight fair is to commit suicide. I will trick them! I remember the words of the ancient slokas: *Strike the enemy when he's tired, wounded, eating, resting, or sleeping. Strike him at dead of night, when he's confused, and when he's leaderless.*"

He woke his two comrades and explained his plan. They hesitated, filled with shame.

"Duryodhana is dead," Ashvatthaman pleaded with them. "What have we left? If you know of any other plan, tell me."

Kripa replied, "Two forces govern man's life, fate and character. When the two combine, there's success. Some are able to seize the opportunity, some let it slip by. I, frankly, do not know what to do. A confused man should take another's advice: he should go to intelligent friends. Let us ask Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Vidura what we should do. Let us follow their advice—that is my advice. If then we fail, the fates are against us."

Ashvatthaman listened with sorrow and pain. "Different people reason differently," he said. "Each thinks he reasons best. Each thinks himself more intelligent than his brother. Think as you like, tonight I will slaughter the sleeping Pandavas and their allies, the Panchalas. I shall have done my duty. Nothing will make me happier."

"I can see how revenge grips your heart," said Kripa. "Not even Indra can dissuade you now from your task. Take off your armour, and sleep. In the morning I and Kritavarman will join you in your mission."

"How can I sleep?" asked Ashvatthaman, his eyes red with anger. "Can an angry man sleep? Can a man in the grip of lust sleep? Can a man hankering after money sleep? I will sleep, and sleep long and soundly, when my enemies are all killed."

He rose and began to yoke the horses to his chariot. They said, "Wait! what's the hurry? We have promised to go with you tomorrow."

"I have vowed to kill Dhrishtadyumna. If he is weaponless when he dies, he cannot attain the hero's heaven," explained Ashvatthaman. "Let us go—and let us go now!"

He galloped away in the direction of the enemy. The followed. They approached the Pandava camp like three glowing fires at a ritual sacrifice.

Ashvatthaman stopped at the entrance, and they approached the camp on foot.

Here they saw a giant horripilatory creature,
Guarding the entrance.
A bloody tiger skin round his loins dripped blood,

A black deer skin draped his upper body,
A large snake was his sacred thread;
His long arms brandished various weapons,
His mouth blazed, yawning and dreadful,
His face had thousands of eyes.
Ashvatthaman fired divine weapons at him—
He devoured them, like fire devouring water.
Ashvatthaman hurled a fiery dart—
It splintered like a meteor against the sun.
Ashvatthaman drew out a sky-blue sword,
Like a blue-black snake emerging from its hole—
He devoured it; it vanished like a mongoose in the ground.
"Wonderful!" exclaimed Ashvatthaman.
"I will take the help of Shiva,
Who wears a garland of human skulls,
Who is called Hara, than whom is no god greater."
Ashvatthaman prayed:
"I seek your protection, O Shiva,
Shiva the Fierce, called Rudra, Ishvara, and Girisha,
Boon-giving Shiva, Lord of the Universe,
Blue-throated and three-eyed lord of Uma,
Matted-haired Shiva who wanders in the funeral ghats,
Carrying a skull-topped club.
Glory to the great Shiva!
Red-haired Destroyer of the Triple City,
Unendurable, irresistible Shiva,
Rider of the bull, wearer of the moon on his forehead.
For you, Shiva, I pour my soul in this fire,
I am the victim.
Favour me, O lord!"

Shiva appeared in person, smiling. "Krishna worshipped me often with truth, purity, penance, and devotion in thought, word, and deed. There is none dearer to me than Krishna. Till now I have protected the Panchalas in battle. Now Time afflicts them—their lives have run out."

Handing his supplicant a brilliantly polished sword, he entered Ashvatthaman's body. Filled with Shiva's energy, Ashvatthaman blazed with glory. Accompanied by rakshasas and many invisible helpers on his right and left, he strode towards the entrance of the Pandava camp.

"I shall speed through the camp like Yama, god of death," he said to Kritavarman and Kripa, who were waiting at the entrance. Fearless, he entered by a doorless section and, guided by signs, made his way to the quarters of Dhrishtadyumna.

Weary with battle, the Panchala heroes were sleeping together in one large tent. Dhrishtadyumna lay alone on a silk bed sheet; fragrant flowers were scattered on his bed, and from one corner rose soft incense smoke.

Ashvatthaman kicked him. He woke with a start and recognised his enemy.

Ashvatthaman seized him by the hair, pulled him from his bed, and flung him down on the ground. Drowsy and afraid, Dhrishtadyumna struggled feebly. Ashvatthaman kicked him in the throat and chest; he moaned like an animal about to die. He clawed at Ashvatthaman with his nails.

"Kill me, kill me quickly," he implored indistinctly, "but let me die weaponed. Let me die a hero's death."

"For those who kill their gurus, there is no heaven," said Ashvatthaman, and continued to kick him in the groin and genitals till he died.

His wives and guards heard his whimpering, and woke; they saw a strange creature kicking Dhristadyumna and were paralysed into silence, thinking a superhuman being was attacking their king.

Ashvatthaman left the tent and mounted his chariot The women and the guards sent up a terrible clamour. He careened through the camp, killing wherever he went. Women screamed, and begged their lords to pursue the mysterious, destroying visitor.

"Is he a rakshasa or a human being?" they said. "He has killed our king, and he does not leave the camp."

He slew the trembling and screaming warriors like animals in a giant sacrifice. Those who woke were stunned by the terrifying commotion; they looked fearfully at each other, and closed their eyes, thinking that a rakshasa was attacking them.

He entered the tent of Shikhandin and cut him in two with a single sweep of the sword.

The Panchala warriors saw visions of Night coming like Death, a black form with bloody mouth and eyes, wearing crimson garlands and smeared with crimson paste, dressed in a single crimson cloth, carrying a noose; she was an old hag, chanting in a funereal voice, and dragging away men, horses, and elephants with her noose.

Even as they woke, Ashvatthaman, like Time the Destroyer let loose, sliced off the feet of some and the thighs and groins of others. The camp was soon littered with mangled and mutilated bodies. Confused shouts—"What's this?", "Who's here?", "What's this noise?", "Where is he?"—were heard. In his fury he slaughtered Panchala and Pandava soldiers in their armour, without giving them a chance to use their weapons.

In the tumult, some rushed at each other; some ran wildly, killing whoever came in their path. Deprived of reason, drowsy with sleep, blanketed by night, and driven by fate, they slew their own friends. The guards at the entrances fled. Cries and moans filled the camp. Those who escaped were slaughtered outside the entrance by Kripa and Kritavarman, who then set fire to the camp in three places. Ashvatthaman raced through the blazing tents, sword in hand, hacking off heads and shoulders.

A profound darkness settled on the camp.

In the darkness came rakshasas and blood-thirsty creatures to gorge at the corpses. They were long-thighed creatures, with five feet; they had giant stomachs, stone-like teeth, red skins, and blue throats; they strutted on five feet and small bells jingled on their bodies. They danced on the field in ecstatic little groups, shouting, "Delicious!", "Sweet!" They gulped the soft marrow, they gobbled blood, and ran naked over the field.

When morning dawned, Ashvatthaman wished to leave the camp. He was drenched with blood, and the sword stuck so firmly in his hand that hand and sword seemed to be one. Kripa and Kritavarman congratulated him. "They are dead, all the Panchalas and the sons of Draupadi; even the Matsyas and Somakas have been slain. Let us go to Duryodhana with the happy news." They found Duryodhana still prostrate and breathing heavily, almost on the point of death. He had begun to vomit blood; wolves and hyenas slunk round him. They wiped the blood from their faces with their hands, and cried, seeing him die slowly, alone and helpless.

"Duryodhana is laid low," said Kripa. "Fate has humbled the commander of eleven *akshauhinis*. Once Brahmins hovered round him; now wolves and hyenas wait."

"If you are still alive, O Duryodhana, listen to me," said Ashvatthaman, "for I bring you pleasant news Seven Pandavas still live against the three of us. The five brothers, Krishna, and Satyaki. The sons of Draupadi are dead, the children of Dhrishtadyumna have been killed too. Swift has been our revenge—the Pandavas are left with no children! I personally slew Dhristadyumna as I would an animal!"

Duryodhana heard and said softly, "You have done what neither Bhishma, Karna, nor Drona could do. May you prosper, Ashvatthaman! We will meet again in heaven."

He surrendered his life-breath; his body remained on the earth, and his life-essence ascended to heaven. They repeatedly embraced him, looking fixedly at him.

Then they mounted their chariots and left.

That night the driver of Dhrishtadyumna's chariot brought news of the great carnage to Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira wept. "First we defeat them, then they destroy us. The losers win, the victors lose. Like careless merchants drowned in a stream after a safe ocean crossing. I grieve for Draupadi. All dead?"

He hurried to the camp site, and saw his sons, friends, advisers fearfully mangled, dying or dead.

Draupadi arrived there later, grief in her full lotus eyes like darkness in the sun. She looked once, and collapsed. Yudhishthira raised her up in his arms, and embraced her. She wept profusely.

"Avenge them," she said. "If you do not kill Ashvatthaman and his followers, I will not leave this camp."

"Ashvatthaman has fled to a forest," said Yudhishthira.

"I have heard he was born with a gem on his head," she said. "Kill him and bring me the gem to put on my head.

They proceeded in chariots along the bank of the Ganga, till they came to a spot where the dark skinned and island-born Vyasa sat surrounded by a group of disciples. Among them they noticed Ashvatthaman, dressed in a garment of kusha grass, covered with dust and anointed with ghee.

Bhima picked up his bow and rushed at him, shouting, "He's mine!"

Thinking that the time of his death had come, Ashvatthaman summoned the mantra given to him by his father. In his left hand he held a blade of grass; he inspired it with the mantra; it changed into a dreadful divine weapon. He prayed, "May this weapon destroy the Pandavas!," and instantly an all-consuming fire sprang out of the blade of grass.

But Bhima, anticipating Ashvatthaman's intentions, had already turned to Arjuna and said, "Shoot quickly the great anti-weapon given to you by Drona."

Arjuna jumped lightly from his chariot, with a fixed-arrow bow in his hand and whispered. "May this anti-weapon destroy Ashvatthaman's power."

The anti-weapon exploded in a ball of flame, even as Ashvatthaman's did. The sky resounded; thousands of meteors seemed to fall on the shaking earth. Trees, mountains, and lakes trembled.

The two great sages, Narada and Vyasa, seeing the weapons about to destroy the three worlds, appeared between them and neutralised their destructiveness.

"What are you doing?" they said. "The other heroes, now lying dead, also had special weapons, but never used them. Are you mad? Why do you use these terrible weapons upon human beings?"

Arjuna resolved to withdraw his. "But if I do, his will consume us," he said, "so decide what you should do now." With great difficulty, he recalled his weapon.

Vyasa said to Ashvatthaman, "Neither anger nor desire to kill you made Arjuna shoot the weapon known as the Brahmastra. He did so in self-defence. Withdraw yours. Let anger leave your heart, let the Pandavas live. Give them the gem on your head."

Ashvatthaman said, "This gem means more to me than all the world's wealth. This gem protects its wearer from all weapons, from disease and hunger. I would never part with it; but because you ask me to, here it is. Take it. But my deadly blade of grass cannot be withdrawn. Once shot, it is shot for ever, and will do its fierce work. It will enter the wombs of the Pandava ladies."

"Very well then," said Vyasa, "let the blade of grass enter their wombs. But restrain yourself. Let the fighting end."

Krishna smilingly said to Ashvatthaman, "When Virata's daughter Uttara became Arjuna's daughter-in-law by marrying Abhimanyu, a Brahmin said to her, 'A son called Parikshit will be born to her, when the Pandava line becomes extinct.' "

"Then may this blade of grass pierce Uttara's womb and destroy the foetus which you, Krishna, are so eager to protect," said Ashvatthaman.

"Your weapon is deadly, and the foetus will die," said Krishna. "But because you kill children, your punishment will be this—you will wander for three thousand years on the face of this earth, without a friend and without anyone to talk to. You will pass through many countries, a lonely man amid crowds of men. Your body will emit a foul stench of pus and blood, and you will hide in lonely forests and dark marshes. All the diseases that afflict men will afflict you in your wanderings over the earth."

Ashvatthaman gave his gem to the Pandavas, and hid himself in the forest.

With Krishna, Vyasa and Narada at their head, they hurried to the camp and handed the gem over to Draupadi, who was engaged in her vow.

"Revenge was all that I wanted," she said. "Let Yudhishthira wear the gem on his head."

To please Draupadi, Yudhishthira wore the gem, treating it as he would a gift from a guru. It shone on his head like the moon on top of a hill.

The Eleventh Book: The Women

With the death of his hundred sons, Dhritarashtra lost all hope. He was speechless; he looked as desolate as a tree stripped of all its branches.

Wise Sanjaya went to him and said, "Grief is futile, Sire. Eighteen *akshauhinis* have been slaughtered on the battlefield. The earth is empty. The kings who joined your son's army are dead. Only the funeral rites of your sons, grandsons, relatives and friends remain to be performed."

Without sons, advisers and friends, the powerful Raja Dhritarashtra collapsed: he toppled like a tree downed in a storm.

"I have no kingdom left, no relatives left," he said, "I have no sight. My radiance is all gone. I rejected the advice of friends, of Balarama, and the holy *rishis* Narada and Vyasa. Krishna in the assembly hall said sensibly to me, 'Make peace. Let your son possess the whole kingdom—grant just five villages to the Pandavas'. I was a fool. I did not listen, and so I now suffer. How I suffer! If it must be so, then let it be so. The Pandavas will witness my slow, last journey to the realm of Brahma."

Sanjaya heard the grief-stricken monarch and tried to console him.

"Cast off grief, Sire. Time was when you could have decided impartially. A hard task, but you had the chance. And you let it pass. Who doesn't know that we should refrain from doing anything that will lead to regret and repentance? You were fond of your son, and you took his side. Now you feel remorse. But what use is grief? The man who is greedy for honey, without taking into account the fall from the tree—such a man is bound to regret and repent his action. Your tears, Sire, will not be approved by the experienced and wise—nor by the scriptures. Let your tears become sparks of fire—the funeral fire for the dead whom they mourn. Control your grief with your strong sense. Steady yourself with your atman!"

And Vidura gave the following nectar-sweet advice to Dhritarashtra:

"Rise, Sire! Why are you lying supine on the floor? Only you can help yourself!

What is created gets destroyed,
What rises high, falls low.

Union brings separation,
Life brings death.
Both hero and coward are doomed to die.
The duty of Kshatriyas is to fight.
Those who don't, at best postpone the end.
There is no escape when the time comes.
First, creatures are non-existent,
Then they exist,
After which they become non-existent again.
Is this a cause for grief?
Will grief take you to the dead?
Grief will not make you die.
What is the point then in grieving?
This is the way the world is;
Take it as it is.
How will grieving help?
Death hates none, and loves none,
Death does not spare even the gods.
Like a tearing wind that flattens grass blades,
Death cuts through life.
Life is a caravan whose destination is death.
What does it matter whom death takes first?
Do not grieve for the dead heroes:
The scriptures have ordained heaven for them.
They died facing their enemy:
How can that be a cause for grief?
For a Kshatriya death on the battlefield
Is a sure entry to heaven.
Thousands of mothers and thousands of fathers,
Thousands of sons and thousands of wives!
Whose mothers, whose fathers?
All come and go.
Whose are we? We come and go.
Thousands of sorrows every day,
Thousands of fears every day—
The wise ignore them, the ignorant suffer.
Time hates none, and loves none,
Time spares none.
Time creates, and Time destroys,

Time is awake when all things sleep.
Nothing endures but Time.
Youth and good looks, life and health,
Wealth and friendship—nothing stays.
The wise man achieves serenity
By overcoming both grief and joy.
Whatever we crave, is ephemeral.
The world is an all-too-transient plantain tree.
The wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor,
Stripped of flesh, bereft of craving,
Perish on the same funeral pyre.
After they become ashes, who can tell
Who was rich, who poor, who ugly, who handsome?
The body is like a house, say the wise:
It decays.
Only one thing is eternal.
Just as a man takes off a new or old dress
And puts on another,
The atman puts off one body
And takes on another.
It is karma that brings joy or sorrow.
Willing or unwilling, we live by our karma.
Observe the potter shaping his pots:
Some break on the wheel,
Some crack after removed from the wheel,
Some spoil when wet, some when dry,
Some burst while being fired,
Some after removal from the kiln,
Some shatter in use . . .
So some of us die in the womb,
Some immediately after birth,
Some a day later,
Some a fortnight later, some a month,
Some after one year, some after two,
Some in youth, some in middle age, some old.
Their karma determines it all.
This is the way the world is—
So what is the point in grieving?
Swimmers dive,

then emerge from the water;
So creatures sink into,
and emerge from the stream of life."

"Show me a clear path through the dark thickets of dharma,' said Dhritarashtra.

Vidura replied: "I namaskara the Self-Born One. Since you order me, I will begin.

"Excellent rishis say life is a jungle. Take a certain Brahmin. Wandering through life, he loses himself in a dense jungle filled with wild beasts. Lions and tigers, elephants and bears. . . Yelling and trumpeting and roaring. . . . A dismal scene to frighten even the god of death Yama.

"The Brahmin is terror-stricken. He horripilates. His mind is a bundle of fears He walks, fast; then he begins to run, helter-skelter; he looks right and left, hoping to find someone who will save him. But the fierce beasts—they are everywhere—the jungle echoes with their weird roaring—wherever he goes, they are there, ahead of him.

"He suddenly notices that the fearful forest is swathed in a massive net. In front of him, with open arms, is a horrendous-looking female. Also, five-headed snakes hiss at him—tall snakes, their hill-huge bodies slithering up to the sky.

"In the middle of the forest, unknown to the agitated Brahmin, is a well covered with grass and intertwining creepers. He falls in that well, and dangles there, clutched by a creeper, like a jackfruit ripe for plucking. He hangs there, feet up, head down.

"Horror upon horror! In the bottom of the well he sees a monstrous snake. On the edge of the well is a huge elephant. A black elephant with six heads and twelve feet. A hulking beast hovering at the well's mouth. And, buzzing in and out of the clutch of creepers, are giant, repulsive bees surrounding a honey-comb. They are trying to sip the deliciously sweet honey, the honey all creatures love, the honey whose real taste only children know.

"The honey drips out of the comb, and the honey drops fall on the hanging Brahmin's tongue. Helpless he dangles, relishing the honey drops The more the drops fall, the greater the Brahmin's pleasure. But his thirst is not quenched. More! Still more! 'I am alive!' he says. 'I am enjoying life!'

"Even as he says this, olack and white rats are biting at the roots of the creeper. Fears encircle him. Fear of the carnivores, fear of the fierce female, fear of the monstrous snake, fear of the giant elephant, fear of the rat-devoured creeper about to snap, fear of the large buzzing bees. . . . In that flux and flow of fear he dangles, hanging on to hope, surviving in the jungle of *samsara*. . . ."

Dhitrarashtra said, "How terrible! How pitiful! Tell me, finest of speakers, what makes this poor man cling so stubbornly to life? What makes him relish his hopeless condition? We must help him. We must have compassion and free him from his miserable state."

"Sire," replied Vidura, "the story of the man in the well is a metaphor used by the knowers of the truths of moksha in order to help a person achieve a transcending serenity.

"The jungle is the universe, the dark area around the well is an individual life-span. The wild beasts are Diseases. The fierce female is Decay, if the wise interpret rightly, and Decay destroys form and beauty. The well is the material world.

"The huge snake at the bottom of the well is Kala, all-consuming Time, the ultimate and unquestioned annihilator.

"The clutch of creeper from which the man dangles is the self-preserving life-instinct found in all creatures.

"The six-headed elephant trampling the tree at the well's mouth is the Year—six faces, six seasons; twelve feet, twelve months.

"The rats nibbling at the creeper are Day and Night gnawing at the life-span of all creatures.

"The bees are Desires. The drops of honey are Pleasures that come from desires indulged. They are the rasa of kama, the juice of the senses in which all men drown.

"This is the way the wise interpret the chakra of life; this is the way they escape the chakra of life."

The words of Vidura failed to revive Dhritarashtra. The death of his sons had induced in him a prolonged coma. Seeing him depressed and semiconscious, Vyasa, Vidura, Sanjaya and other well-wishers, including the servants and courtiers of the palace, sprinkled cool water on his body, massaged him gently, and fanned him with palm leaves. Recovering his senses, he wept uncontrolably.

He ordered his chariot to be yoked, and said to Vidura: "Summon Queen Gandhari and all the Bharata ladies here. Summon Kunti and her ladies too."

He climbed into his chariot.

Grief-striken Gandhari and Kunti, accompanied by the royal ladies, hurried to meet Dhritarashtra. Seeing him, they burst into loud moans. Vidura, deeply moved, tried his best to console them He helped them into the waiting chariots and escorted them out of the city

Lamentation emanated from every Kuru house; even the children wailed in sorrow. The ladies, so modest that even the gods were denied a glimpse of them, now were exposed to the stares of the common city folk. Their lovely hair dishevelled, their ornaments discarded, each dressed in a single drape of cloth, they moved out slowly in their grief. They streamed out of their white houses like a dappled herd of deer from mountain caves after the death of their leader. Wave after wave of bereaved women scattered like confused fillies. Clutching each other's hands, they wailed over the loss of their sons, brothers, and husbands. A scene resembling the end of a yuga! Screaming and sobbing and tripping, insane with grief, they did not know what they were doing. Women who earlier would blush with shame to appear even in front of other women, now felt no loss of modesty standing scantily dressed before their mothers-in-law.

Sadly, Raja Dhritarashtra emerged from the city gates with thousands of weeping women, and hurriedly proceeded to the battlefield.

Two miles from the city, he met the three chariot heroes Kripa, Ashvatthaman, and Kritavarman. They said to him with tear-filled eyes: "Sire, your son did wonders on the battlefield. He is now in the realm of Indra. We are the only three chariot heroes in Duryodhana's army to escape. The rest are dead" Kripa continued, this time addressing grief-stricken Gandhari: "Your sons died like heroes on the battlefield. None begged for mercy. Let me tell you what we, led by Ashvatthaman, did to the Pandavas. When we learnt that Bhima had unfairly killed your son Duryodhana, we slipped into their camp and slaughtered the sleeping Pandavas. All the Panchalas have been killed by us. We have killed all the sons of Drupada, and all the sons of Draupadi. Since the three of us are no match for the remaining Pandavas, we have run away. They are sure to hunt for us. We must leave quickly. We ask your permission to leave, Sire."

Continuing to look straight at Dhritarashtra, Kripa, Kritavarman and Ashvatthaman respectfully half circled round the king, and galloped off towards the bank of the Ganga. There they parted: Kripa went to Hastinapura, Kritavarman sought refuge in his own kingdom, and Ashvatthaman went to the ashrama of Vyasa. It was soon after this that the Pandavas tracked Ashvatthaman down as already narrated.

News was brought to Yudhishthira that his uncle, Raja Dhritarashtra, had come out of Hastinapura with the palace ladies. Yudhishthira, mourning the death of the Pandava sons, went to meet Dhritarashtra, mourning the loss of his hundred Kaurava sons. Accompanying him were mahatma Krishna, Yuyudhana, and Yuyutsu. His four brothers, sorrow-stricken Draupadi and her Panchala lady-attendants came also. Near the banks of the Ganga, Yudhishthira saw the Bharata ladies bewailing their loss; they stood there, like a swarm of she-ospreys.

They lifted their hands in grief; they screamed their sorrow; they surrounded Yudhishthira.

Here he comes,
The man of dharma,
The king of truth and compassion,
The slayer of brothers, gurus, sons, and friends!
Brave one,
Is your heart happy
After killing Drona, Bhishma, and Jayadratha?
Do you still want the kingdom
Now that your brothers are dead,
Now that Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons are dead?

Yudhishthira ignored the wailing women, and touched the feet of his uncle, Raja Dhritarashtra. The other Pandavas did the same, one by one, introducing themselves by name.

Reluctantly, Dhritarashtra embraced Yudhishthira, the eldest son of Pandu. He renewed the fire of his anger for Bhima, fanned by the wind of his grief.

Krishna pushed Bhima aside, and placed a life-size iron likeness of Bhima in the king's embrace. (Krishna had guessed Dhritarashtra's intentions, and prepared for such an eventuality.)

Enormously powerful, Dhritarashtra embraced the iron Bhima with the strength of ten thousand elephants, crushing it into fragments. The effort lacerated his chest; he vomited blood. Drenched with blood, he collapsed, like a *parijata* tree under the weight of its red flowers.

Sanjaya helped him to rise, saying softly, "You should not do this, Sire."

His anger dissipated, Dhritarashtra began to weep, moaning, "Hai, Bhima! Hai, Bhima!"

Krishna said, "There is no need to grieve, Dhritarashtra. You did not kill Bhima. It was an iron statue that you crushed. I pushed Bhima away. How would killing Bhima have helped you? Would it have restored your sons to life?"

Maids approached with water to wash the king.

After the washing, Krishna said to Dhritarashtra: "You have read the Vedas, you are versed in the shastras. You know the Puranas, you have studied the dharma of kings. You are wise. Why do you still harbour such anger and hate when you know that all that has happened is the result of your own fond weakness for your son?"

Dhritarashtra heard the straight truth spoken by Krishna, and replied: "You are right, Krishna What you say is true. A father's fondness made me blind to dharma. You did right in pushing Bhima away. Now, my anger and hate are stilled. I wish to embrace Pandu's second son. My own sons are dead: my happiness is now in the hands of the sons of Pandu."

The old monarch embraced Bhima and Arjuna, as well as Nakula and Sahadeva; he wept, and gave them his blessings.

Instructed to do so by Dhritarashtra, the Pandavas, accompanied by Krishna, went to see Gandhari. Gandhari intended to curse Yudhishthira, whom she held responsible for the death of her hundred sons. Vyasa divined her intention and, purifying himself in the fresh and holy waters of the Ganga, the great *rishi* arrived there with the swiftness of thought. At the right moment he said to his daughter-in-law:

"This is not the time to curse anyone. This is the time for forgiveness. Cast off anger, Gandhari. Cultivate the art of peace."

Gandhari replied, "I wish the Pandavas no harm. I do not want them to die. My heart is restless because all my sons are dead. I know it is my duty to cherish the Pandavas as much as Kunti does. But there is something that Bhima did, in Krishna's very presence, that I cannot forget. The noble Bhima challenged Duryodhana to a mace combat. When he found that my son excelled him in every tactic, he struck him below the waist. This has roused my anger. Why should a warrior violate the rules that mahatmas have laid down for duels?"

Frightened, Bhima looked at her and tried to placate her.

"Right or wrong," he said, "I did what I did because I was afraid. I did it to save my own skin. Forgive me. No one could defeat your son in a fair duel. I did what I did because I had no choice. Duryodhana had earlier been unfair to us. What else could I do? Your son was the only Kaurava hero left. If he killed me, the kingdom would again slip out of our hands. I did what I had to do. You know how your son abused Draupadi in her period, when she was dressed in a single garment."

Gandhari listened, and replied: "You praise my son's military prowess highly. Surely he deserved a nobler death. I know that he did all that you say he did. But you—you drank Duhshasana's blood on the battlefield! What can be more heinous than that? A grisly, gruesome, inhuman act, Bhima! Despicable! Utterly unworthy of you!"

Bhima replied, "It is immoral to drink the blood of a stranger, even more immoral to drink one's own blood. One's brother is oneself. But listen to me, mother, and believe me when I say that the blood never went beyond my lips and teeth. Karna was witness to this. Only my hands were smeared with Duhshasana's blood. After the dice game I exploded in rage when Draupadi was dragged by her hair. I still remember the words I uttered then, and the vow I made. If I failed to keep my vow, I would have lost my Kshatriya honour. That is why I did what I did. Do not put all the blame on me. Realise that you failed to restrain your sons—how can all the fault be ours?"

Gandhari said, "You have killed all the hundred sons of this old man. My child, could you not have spared one son—just one, one who had harmed you least of all? Could you not have left one prop for a blind husband and wife in their old age?"

Saying this, Gandhari, still burning with anger, enquired, "Where is the king?"

Yudhishthira, trembling, approached her with folded palms, and said softly: "Devi, I am Yudhishthira, who has cruelly killed your sons. I have caused all this carnage. I deserve your curse. Curse me! I have no desire for life, kingdom, or wealth. I have killed my friends. I have hated my friends and killed them. I am a fool."

Yudhishthira said this and stood in front of her, trembling in fear.

Gandhari sighed, and kept silent.

Well versed in dharma, the Queen of the Kauravas focused her eyes, from under the bandage that covered them, on Yudhishthira's toes as he bent to touch her feet.

Blisters instantly appeared on his beautiful toe-nails.

Arjuna noticed this, and quickly hid behind Krishna. The other Pandavas moved about restlessly.

But Gandhari forgot her anger and spoke to them gently, like a mother.

Kunti saw her sons after many years; she covered her face with her dress and wept. She touched their wounds and scars. She embraced and hugged them, and wept again

Draupadi wept too. She lay on the ground and wept piteously: "Where have they all gone? O where has Abhimanyu gone? Why don't they see me, why don't they come to me? What will I do with a kingdom, I who have no children?"

Kunti helped Draupadi to rise, and both approached Gandhari.

Gandhari said: "Daughter, do not grieve. Look, my grief is greater than yours. Time has brought cosmic chaos on us. It is all my fault. If you grieve, who will comfort me?" Where Gandhari stood was far from the battlefield, but she saw the slaughter of the Kurus with divine vision. The great *rishi* Vyasa had granted her such vision because she observed strict vows, practised severe penance, and always spoke the truth.

She saw the field of battle, and she burst into loud lamentation She saw from far, but it all seemed so near.

Fearful scenes.
Horripilating scenes.
Hundreds of thousands of corpses,
Scattered bones, blood-drenched hair,
Headless bodies, bodiless heads,
Blood of elephants and horses,
Blood of chariot-heroes and others,
Elephants trumpeting, horses neighing,
Men and women screaming,
Jackals and cranes and ravens and crows,
Rakshasas devouring human flesh,
Ospreys and vultures and hyenas . . . .

Raja Dhritarashtra, led by Vyasa, and Pandu's sons, led by Yudhishthira, followed by Krishna and the Kuru ladies, went to the field of battle.

They reached Kurukshetra.

The ladies saw their dead brothers and sons and fathers and husbands stretched on the ground, eaten by wolves and ravens, and blood-sucking spirits and rakshasas and other night-creatures.

They screamed, and descended from their chariots.

They saw sights they had never seen before; some felt sick, some fell down in a faint, some lost their senses.

Gandhari heard the screams and wails of the terrified ladies; she was filled with piteous grief, she turned to lotus-eyed Krishna and said:

"Lotus-eyed Krishna,
Look at my daughters-in-law!
Listen to their piteous cries!
See them running in confusion!
See them searching for husbands and sons!
The heroes who slept on perfumed beds
Now sleep forever on the hard ground.
Vultures and wolves are now their ornaments.
Their shining swords and maces lie
Beside them, bright as life!
Some are embracing their maces
As if they were sleeping with their wives.

Some, encased in armour, stand upright,
Unmolested by beasts of prey
Who think they are still living.
Wolves drag away the gold neck-chains,
Jackals tug at the golden garlands.
O Krishna,
Look at the pale faces of the ladies
Surrounding their lords like wilted lotuses!
Look at the ladies, senseless with grief,
Placing head on trunk,
Saying, 'No, not this', and wailing.
Some unite arms and thighs and feet,
And moan, and weep, and moan.
Some see their lords' bodies devoured
And cannot recognize them.
What can be more terrible for me, Krishna,
Than to see my ladies, my daughters-in-law,
Suffering thus?
Oh, what heinous karma must be mine
That I should see sons, grandsons, and brothers
Slaughtered by their enemies!"

As she was saying this to Krishna, Gandhari's eyes fell on her dead son Duryodhana, smeared with blood.

She embraced him, and said: "Hai, my son! Hai, my son!" Her tears drenched his garlanded shoulders.

She collapsed with grief. She recovered, and put all the blame on Krishna.

Gandhari said to Krishna:

The Pandavas and Kauravas are all dead.
Why did you allow this, Krishna?
O Krishna, you could have stopped the war.
You had the tongue, you had the power.
Because you did not,
I curse you, Krishna!
By the merit I have as a dutiful wife,
I curse you, Krishna!
Wielder of the discus and mace,

I curse you!
Thirty-six years from now,
You will slaughter your kinsmen as my sons did theirs,
As the Pandavas did. Having slaughtered them,
You will wander in shame and die disgustfully . . . .
And the ladies of your race will weep
As the Bharata ladies are weeping now."

Mahatma Krishna heard the words of Gandhari, smiled gently, and said to her: "No one in the world but I can destroy the Vrishni race. Of this I am sure. By cursing me, you are helping to accomplish my plan. Neither gods nor anti-gods can kill the Vrishni race."

Krishna added, "Rise, Gandhari, do not grieve. It is your fault that all this happened. Your son Duryodhana was wicked-minded and arrogant. Why do you want to transfer blame on me? A Brahmin mother has children who continue the sacred rites; a cow produces offspring to bear the yoke; the mare has her young to become race horses; the Shudra woman has children who learn how to serve others; the Vaishya mother conceives to add to cattle-owners—and a queen like you has sons who die on the battlefield."

Gandhari listened to the unpleasant words of Krishna. Her heart throbbed with anger, but she kept silent.

Dhritarashtra said, "It is time to cremate, with proper rituals, the bodies of the dead, both friendly and hostile. Tell me, Yudhishthira, will the vulture-eaten dead attain the same heavenly region as the others?"

Yudhishthira summoned the priest of the Kauravas, Sudharman, and the priest of the Pandavas, Dhaumya, together with Sanjaya, Vidura, and Yuyutsu, and said: "Make preparation for a mass funeral, where thousands can be cremated, and see that nobody is denied the proper rites."

Vidura, Sanjaya, Sudharman, Dhaumya and others procured sandal, aloe and other wood. They collected ghee, oil, and perfumes. They gathered silken robes, wood of smashed chariots, and broken weapons.

Massive funeral pyres were lit, and the dead quickly cremated, but with the proper rites.

After the cremation, Yudhishthira placed Raja Dhritarashtra at the head and went with his followers to the Ganga. At the banks of the holy Ganga, they divested themselves of their ornaments, upper garments, belts and girdles. The Kuru ladies performed the last water rituals.

Kunti, in spontaneous grief, said softly to her sons:

"That great hero and archer,
The leader of chariot-formations,
The warrior whom Arjuna killed,
Who you thought was Radha's son,
Who fought all of you so bravely,
Who shone as Duryodhana's commander,
Whose energy was unequalled,
Who preferred honour to life,
The truth-based warrior who never tired—
He was your eldest brother, he was Karna,
He was my son,
His father was the sun god Surya,
He was born in natural armour,
His splendour was the splendour of the sun."

The Twelfth Book: Consolation

The noble Pandavas offered water oblations to all their friends and kinsmen, and passed the period of mourning impurity, which lasted a month, on the banks of the sacred Ganga. Many holy men visited them there, among them Vyasa, Narada, and Krishna, accompanied by their pupils. Yudhishthira proferred the required homage, and seated them on luxurious carpets; they gave him words of comfort and consolation.

"The entire earth is now in my hands," said Yudhishthira. "I have won it with the advice of Krishna, with the help of Bhima and Arjuna, with the prayers of thousands of Brahmins. But grief sits heavy on my heart. Abhimanyu dead, the sons of Draupadi dead . . . . What will Subhadra, mother of Abhimanyu, say? What will the people of Dvaraka say to Krishna? Another grief oppresses me deeply. Kunti never told us Karna was our uterine brother, born to her in secret. Only when he died did she tell us. Had Arjuna and Karna both been on my side, I could have challenged Krishna himself! Even when Karna spoke harshly to us in the palace assembly room, my anger cooled when my eyes fell by chance on his feet. They were our mother Kunti's feet! I thought hard at the time; I thought, how could there be such a close resemblance, unless . . . . But it never occurred to me, I never guessed the truth. Why didn't the earth swallow my chariot? Who cursed my brother to die at our hands?"

Turning to Arjuna, and sighing deeply, he continued, "We should never have returned from our exile, Arjuna! We have squabbled like a pack of dogs over a piece of meat, and we have won—and the meat has lost its savour. The meat is thrown aside, the dogs have forgotten it. Not for mountains of gold, not for all the horses and cattle of the world should we have killed the Kauravas. But they are dead. We have killed them. The blame is for ever ours. It is best that I go to the woods, adopt the habit of silence, and tread the path of the wise and holy ones."

Arjuna ran his tongue over his lips, but smiled, and said, "It is painful, it is sad to see you like this, elder brother. But the scriptures are clear on one thing: the wealth a Kshatriya king snatches from others becomes his. Have you ever seen wealth earned without someone exploited, without someone hurt and suffering? The earth is now yours. Perform the necessary sacrifices and purify yourself, and then live to enjoy what belongs rightfully to you."

"Listen to me carefully, Arjuna," said Yudhishthira, "listen with your entire conscience. Then you will understand. I cannot do what you say. I must follow the path of the virtuous, giving up all worldly pleasures. I will sit in the forest, enduring cold, wind, and heat; hunger, thirst, and exhaustion as is recommended in the scriptures. Daily I will listen only to happy bird song and the cries of animals, breathe the fragrant air, and see life grow slowly before my eyes. I will be serene in everything. If a person cuts off my arm, I will smile; if another smears scented sandal paste on my other arm, I will smile too. I will have no ties, no bondage; like the wind, I will be free. For in such freedom alone will I find supreme happiness."

Bhima interrupted, "This is all like a fool's prattling of the scriptures. What was the point in going to war if now you refuse to shoulder the burden of victory? What was the point in killing the Kauravas? If we had known this was going to be the outcome of our efforts, we would never have gone to war. Do you think a Kshatriya is incapable of forgiveness, compassion, pity and ahimsa? If moksha lay in renunciation of human duties, mountains and trees would be the first to get moksha! They have no duties; they don't injure anyone; they are the most celibate things on earth! Why, even the fish would get moksha before we do! Look, the world moves because duties are performed all the time. How can escaping from his duties bring a man happiness?"

Yudhishthira did not speak. After his brothers had explained the meaning of the scriptures to him, the large-eyed, lovely-hipped Draupadi looked gently at him and said these sweet words: "Your brothers cry themselves hoarse like little sparrows, my husband, but you do not listen to them. Do you remember you told them near Lake Dvaita, when we were passing the term of our exile, to get ready to fight against Duryodhana? Why have you changed suddenly, my lord? Can a fish breed in a waterless ditch? Can a eunuch have children? Can a weakling be a Kshatriya?"

Yudhishthira looked at Bhima. "Power, folly, pride, ambition, and desire for worldly possessions—these are the reasons for your wanting the kingdom. Give up desire, control your ambition—and learn to be happy. Even a king has only one stomach, like other men—how much can he gorge?

"Is there an end to desire?
A day will not fill it, nor a month,
A whole life will not quench the demands of desire.
Feed fire with fuel—it blazes up;
Take fuel away from it—it is extinguished.
Discipline the fire in your stomach, Bhima.
Rule your stomach before you rule kingdoms.
Remember the story of the holy Janaka?—
'Having nothing, I am rich!
If my kingdom burns down, I am still rich!'
The wise man sees, as if from a hill top,
Thousands caught in the grip of desire,
Thousands mourning without cause to mourn,
Thousands on the ignorant plain below."

"You grieve to the point of distraction," said Vyasa.

"This grief is pointless.
What is born, dies; what's united, divides.
Destiny rules us all.
Like bubbles on a stream, things come and go.
Friends do not bring joy, nor enemies misery;
Wisdom does not bring wealth, nor wealth happiness.
Destiny rules us all.
You are a Kshatriya, Yudhishthira—
You are not made to sit idle.
Work!"

Seeing Yudhishthira still silent, Arjuna looked at Krishna. Krishna took Yudhisthira's hand—fragrant with sandal and looking like a marble column—in his, and said, the words issuing sweetly from his lotus face, "Do not let grief destroy you, Yudhishthira. The Kshatriyas who have died will not return—they are like dreams that vanish on waking. They fell facing the enemy. None was cut down in retreat, none had wounds in the back. They are now in heaven, and deserve better than your grief."

"He is right," said Vyasa. "Perform the horse sacrifice as an expiation, if you must. Be freed of all your wrongs, and rule the kingdom happily. Expiation is needed if a man neglects his duties and acts deceitfully, if he gets up from bed after sunrise and goes to bed at sunset, if he has decaying nails and foul teeth, if his younger brother marries first, if he kills a Brahmin, spreads malicious gossip, gives away a younger sister in marriage before he does an elder, teaches the scriptures to a person who is unworthy of learning them or refuses to teach them to a person worthy of learning them, sells meat, sells sacred knowledge, kills a guru or a woman, kills an animal for a non-sacrificial purpose, sets fire to a dwelling house, defies the advice of his guru, and breaks a solemn promise. Many other things too should not be done. One's own dharma should not be given up, another's dharma should not be taken on; forbidden food should not be eaten; a fugitive who seeks shelter should not be betrayed; servants should not be maltreated, and a woman who offers herself, wishing to be a mother, should not be refused; a Brahmin should not be insulted, and the payment of *dakshina* should never be forgotten. Certain acts, though wrong, do not stain the doer. If a Brahimin takes up arms against you, you may kill him without suffering the stain of Brahmin-slaughter. If a pupil has intercourse with a guru's wife at the guru's command, he is not stained. A lie is in order if it saves one's own life or another's if it is for the sake of one's guru, for the sake of gratifying a woman, or arranging a marriage. Wet dreams do not affect the vow of a brahmachari."

"What Vyasa says is entirely right," said Krishna. "The stubbornness of your sorrow is appalling. Like autumn worshippers begging the divinity for favours, we beg you to give it up."

Yudhishthira rose for the good of the world, and laid aside his grief and anxiety. He mounted a new white chariot covered with rugs and deer-skins, and pulled by sixteen white sanctified bullocks. As poets and minstrels chanted his praises, he sat down, like the moon-god in his nectarine ten-horsed vehicle. Bhima held the reins; Arjuna steadied a white, shining umbrella, a star-studded cloud, over his head; Nakula and Sahadeva fanned him with two large white gem-embroidered yak tails. The five brothers in the chariot looked like the five elements riding the world.

Teeming crowds spilled into the open to welcome the brothers as they entered the city gates, making the squares and streets as lovely as ocean waters at moonrise. The houses on the sides, loaded with ornamented ladies, seemed to shake. Drums and conches sounded triumphantly.

Even as the Brahmins in the procession fell silent, a friend of Duryodhana, a rakshasa named Charvaka, disguised as a Brahmin mendicant, addressed the king. He stood proudly in the midst of thousands of austere Brahmins eager to bless the new king, a fearless tuft of hair in the middle of the street, in one hand his rosary, and in the other his trident staff.

"I speak for many Brahmins," he declared, "and I say, 'Shame on you, Yudhishthira! Shame on you for killing your kinsmen!' What have you gained by destroying your race? Better that you should commit suicide, having slain your elders and gurus, than live and rule."

A loud murmuring arose from the Brahmins; it suddenly subsided, and they fell silent, filled with shame and fear.

"I accept the guilt, O noble Brahmin," remarked Yudhishthira, "and I beg to be patient with me. Do not shame me too much. I promise you I shall soon lay down my life."

"No!' shouted the other Brahmins. "We have nothing to do with him. Glory to you, O king! May you prosper!" Seeing through his disguise, they said, "This man is Charvaka, wishing his friend Duryodhana's welfare. We have said nothing of the sort! Glory to you, O king! May you prosper!"

Angered, the Brahmins looked at Charvaka, and uttered, "*Hun*!" The syllable slew him where he stood. Then they intoned their benedictions on Yudhishthira, who accepted the honour. They were paid the necessary respects, and they left.

Yudhishthira sat, facing the east, on a golden throne. On two other seats, facing him, were the excellent heroes, Satyaki and Krishna. On either side sat Bhima and Arjuna on two gem-encrusted seats. On gold-lined ivory seats were Nakula and Sahadeva. Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and Gandhari sat around Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra touched the white flowers, svastikas, various vessels, earth, gold, silver and precious stones placed in front of him. One by one, the subjects, led by priests, filed past Yudhishthira, bringing him gifts and offerings. Golden jars filled with water, copper and silver vessels, earthen pots, flowers, fried paddy, *kusha* grass, cow's milk, and holy fuel, honey, ghee, and gold-ornamented conches were brought as part of the preparation for the ritual. On Krishna's instructions, the priest Dhaumya built an altar inclined slightly to the east and north. Asking Yudhishthira and Draupadi to sit on the excellent tiger-skin seat called the *sarvatabhadra*, he began to chant the mantras as he poured libations of ghee in the holy fire. He rose, and poured water from the sanctified conch on the head of Yudhishthira. Krishna instructed Dhritarashtra to do the same on behalf of the subjects.

After the coronation ritual, Yudhishthira ordered the performance of funeral rites for all who died in the war. When the *sraddha* finished, he dismissed his subjects. The Pandavas retired to rest: Bhima went to the palace of Duryodhana, and Arjuna, at Yudhishthira's orders, occupied Duhshasana's palace; Nakula took the palace of Durmarshana, and Sahadeva retired to Durmukha's. All the palaces had the softest beds, the loveliest ladies, with eyes like lotus petals, and fine food and wine. The brothers passed the night in great happiness, and in the morning, refreshed, they appeared before Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira went with them with folded palms to Krishna of the blue-cloud skin, who sat on a large gold-and-gem throne, dressed in yellow silk and glittering with many ornaments. On his chest shone Vishnu's thirteen-jewelled gem, the *Kaushtubha*, obtained from the churning of the ocean. No metaphor in the three worlds would do justice to his resplendence on that occasion.

With a gentle smile, Yudhishthira asked, "Was your night happy, O Krishna, divine lord, refuge of the three words?"

Krishna, rapt in meditation, did not answer.

Again Yudhishthira said, "You are as steady as a rock or a windless lamp-flame. I bow to you, O Krishna, foremost of mortals and dispeller of doubts."

Krishna smiled gently and said, "I see Bhishma lying on a bed on arrows, like a flame about to be snuffed out. He is thinking of me. Go to him, Yudhishthira: ask him questions on Artha, Dharma, Kama and Moksha, on the rituals and duties recommended for the four castes, on the four divisions of life itself, and on the nature of royal duties. For when Bhishma dies, the fountain of all knowledge will disappear from the world, Go now: go quickly."

"Gladly, if you accompany us," said Yudhishthira.

Krishna turned quickly to Satyaki and ordered his chariot to be got ready. Moon-gems and sun-gems glittering on it, the wind-swift, gold-wheeled chariot was brought; the two excellent steeds, Sugriva and Shaivya, pulled it; it flew the beautiful banner of Garuda, king of birds, and multi-coloured pennants waved on both sides of its charioteer.

They came to where Bhishma lay on the bed of arrows, surrounded by hosts of ascetics, like Indra by the lesser gods.

They greeted him respectfully and sat down around him.

Sadly Krishna asked, "Is your vision as clear as ever, O eloquent Bhishma? Or does the pain from the arrows shoot through your body into your mind? Your father, the royal Shantanu, obtained for you the favour even I do not have—that you should die only when you will your own death. Who else but you is competent to instruct the gods on the mysteries of the past, present, and future?"

"I give you greetings, Krishna," replied Bhishma, "but my mind is in deep pain. These arrows, like fire or poison, cloud my vision. My limbs seem to fail me, and I can hardly speak clearly. Who is there greater than you to discourse on the mysteries of life? How shall a pupil like me dare to teach in the presence of a guru like you?"

The thousand-rayed sun sank slowly in the west. The ascetics and sages saluted Krishna, Bhishma and Yudhishthira, who bowed in return; and when the holy men left, saying, "We will come again tomorrow," Krishna and the Pandavas left in their chariots.

Krishna slept peacefully that night and, waking before dawn, he looked at himself in a clean mirror. Then he summoned Satyaki and said, "Find out if Yudhishthira is dressed for visiting Bhishma."

"I am ready," said Yudhishthira to Satyaki. "But today we shall go alone, without the soldiers. It is not my desire to disturb in any way. When profound words are spoken, the audience should be small."

Again they hurried to the spot, and Yudhishthira looked fearfully at the fallen hero, lying on the ground like the sun fallen from the sky.

"Was your night happy, noble Bhishma?" enquired Krishna. "Is your mind calm, your vision clear?"

"All burning, weakness, fever, worry and pain left me last night, thanks to you," replied Bhishma. "I see the past, present and future as clearly before me as a fruit in my hands."

"Know then that I am the root of fame and virtue," said Krishna. "All things, whether good or bad, proceed from my power, as moonlight proceeds from the cool moon. Who can add to my fame? None. Therefore, O Bhishma, I tell you that whatever you say to the enquiring Pandavas will be held by mortals to be as sacred as the words of the scriptures."

"I will speak on the nature of duty," said Bhishma. "Ask me questions on dharma."

"Yudhishthira is afraid you will curse him," said Krishna. "He feels guilty for the war. He ordered the killing of his own kinsmen."

"Let him approach without fear," said Bhishma. "It is a Kshatriya's duty to fight in a just war, and to kill kinsmen if they challenge him unjustly."

Yudhishthira gently approached Bhishma, and quickly touched his feet.

"Sit down, Yudhishthira," said Bhishma. "And feel free to question me as you like."

"People who know say that royal duties are the highest of all duties. What do they mean?" asked Yudhishthira. "What do duties mean?"

"Let us talk of duties then . . . . The highest duty of a king is never to lose heart, never to despond if things go wrong," said Bhishma. "Truth is a king's highest duty. The king who is devoted to Truth needs devotion to nothing else. Let no king joke with his servants, for look what happens with too much familiarity with inferiors: they lie and steal, they make love to the female guards in the king's presence, they even try to dress like him; they are evasive in front of him, and they gossip about him behind his back. They play with a king, as with a bird tied to a string. This is the result of royal mildness . . . .

"The welfare of his subjects should be his constant concern. Doesn't Manu the lawgiver say: 'Avoid these six as you would a boat with a leak: a guru who doesn't speak, a priest who hasn't studied the scriptures, a king who neglects his subjects, a loud-mouthed wife, a cowherd who sticks to the village, and a barber who roams in the woods.'

"And a king should work; he should work all the time! Doesn't Brihaspati, the father of the gods, say: 'With work is nectar brought forth, with work are anti-gods destroyed, with work Indra rules his heaven.' What's an intelligent king without work?—nothing better than a snake without poison. Let no king relax vigilance. The weakest enemy needs watching. A spark produces a forest fire, a drop of poison kills a man."

With folded palms and deep concentration, Yudhishthira asked again, "What are the duties of the four castes?"

Bhishma replied, "Controlling anger, truthfulness, justice, forgiveness, having lawful children, purity, avoidance of quarrels, simplicity, looking after dependants are the nine duties common to the four castes.

"But a Brahmin's chief duty is to cultivate self-restraint, a Kshatriya's to protect the people, a Vaishya's to make gifts and acquire wealth by honest means, and a Shudra's to serve the first three castes, in return for which he is maintained by them, and receives old umbrellas, turbans, beds, seats, shoes and hand fans. A Shudra has no wealth of his own: whatever he has belongs to his master. But it does not follow that the gods turn down the offerings of a Shudra. What is given with devotion is always accepted—devotion is required for all four castes. No duty is possible without devotion.

"I warn you, Yudhishthira, that it is not easy to know what one's duties are. They are not always clear. Wrong opinions prevail, mistaken conclusions are arrived at, and people follow systems whose founders themselves are confused on the real nature of duties."

"What about duties relating to the actual government of a kingdom?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Most important of all is to get the king crowned and installed. Where anarchy prevails, robbers step in, and dharma goes out. Nothing is more pathetic than a kingdom torn by strife."

"Supposing robbery is rampant and the castes get intermixed as a result of confusion in the kingdom, and Kshatriyas are helpless . . . . Supposing a ruler is able to restore order by punishing severely . . . . Would the scriptures justify such a ruler? Should non-Kshatriyas ever take up arms?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Why should considerations of Shudra, Vaishya or Brahmin interfere with tiding over a crisis?" replied Bhishma. "Any man who plucks drowning people out of swirling waters deserves the highest regard. What good is a bull that doesn't carry a load? a cow that doesn't give milk? a wife who's barren? What good is a king who can't ensure law and order? He's a wooden elephant, a leather deer, a moneyless merchant, a dry field, an ignorant Brahmin, a rainless cloud. Give me the ruler who knows how to reward the good and punish the wicked."

"How should a ruler desirous of victory conduct war without offending dharma?" asked Yudhishthira.

"A king is justified in employing either of two kinds of wisdom — straight and crooked," answered Bhishma, "straight when he himself attacks, crooked if others attack first. Set a thief to catch a thief; deceit's a good medicine for deceit."

"The performance of duty is a long process and has many aspects," said Yudhishthira. "What duties are best? What acts bring the highest merit both in this and the next life?"

"The highest duty is respect accorded to mother, father and guru," replied Bhishma. "What they command is duty. What they don't is not. They are the three worlds, they are the three modes of life, they are the three sacred fires. One teacher is greater than ten learned Brahmins, one professor is greater than ten teachers, and a father is greater than ten professors. But a mother is greater than ten fathers, greater than the world itself. And if you ask my opinion, a guru is greater even than mother and father. They only create one's body, but he guides the precious, imperishable soul."

"Truth and falsehood straddle the world. What is truth? what is falsehood? When should a person tell the truth, when is he permitted to lie?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Truth-speaking goes hand in hand with dharma," replied Bhishma. "Nothing is higher than truth. Let me tell you something which few people know. Never speak a truth when the truth spoken actually covers a lie. Speak a lie if the lie spoken is actually a cover for the truth."

"How should a learned man behave when abused in public by a vain fool?" asked Yudhishthira.

"No fool is greater than he who allows hate to control him. Swallow the insult; endure all that folly does. How does a fool's praise or blame affect you? He's a crow cawing in the wilderness.

If the words of fools were sufficient to tarnish honour, who among us would have honour left? The man who flatters you to your face and maligns you behind your back, is worse than a mad dog—avoid him."

"What is wrong-doing? who is a wrong-doer?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Desire is the root of wrong-doing. From desire grows greed, and from greed springs misdeed. All cunning, all hypocrisy has its roots in greed. Greed gives birth to wrath, greed leads to lust. Confusion, deception, egoism, showing-off, and malice are the children of greed; so are revengefulness, shamelessness, pride of birth, of learning, of beauty, and of wealth; greed strangles pity, and promotes mistrust; greed is the cause of adultery; it breeds lies, gluttony, violence, and malevolence. Greed is everywhere— in the child, in the youth, in the adult. Greed lives on when life itself ceases. A thousand rivers do not satiate this oceanic monster. It afflicts the learned. Greed goes disguised in the cloak of religion."

"Tell me all about ignorance, for the world's misery is all the product of ignorance."

"Greed and ignorance are two sides of the same coin," Bhishma replied. "Ignorance is another name for attachment, vanity, lust, anger, laziness, procrastination, loathing, jealousy, excessive joy and excessive sorrow. As greed grows, ignorance grows; as greed decreases, ignorance decreases. Get rid of greed, which is the root."

"What are the different forms of truth?"

"Truth is duty, truth is penance, truth is yoga, truth is Brahman. Truth has thirteen faces: impartiality, self-control, humility, faith, loyalty, patience, goodness, renunciation, meditation, dignity, serenity, compassion, and ahimsa. It is eternal, and unchangeable. If the merits of a thousand horse sacrifices were weighed against the merits of truth, the balance would tilt in truth's favour."

"Instruct me on the thirteen vices," said Yudhishthira, "wrath, lust, sorrow, loss of judgment, evil intention, jealousy, malice, pride, envy, slander, mistrust, cruelty, and fear."

"They are man's worst enemies, they surround him like wolves surrounding a prey. A Brahmin who sleeps with a woman in her period, who does not perform ritual sacrifices, whose family is ignorant of the scriptures, is no better than a Shudra, and his vice needs expiation. A lie spoken in jest is not immoral; neither is one that is spoken to a woman, or in order to benefit one's guru, or to save one's life. No gold excels a good wife even if she is lowcaste."

Bhishma lapsed into silence, and the five brothers returned to the palace. "Dharma, Artha, and Kama rule the world. Which of these is best?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Dharma," replied Vidura. "On Dharma depend the other two, Success and Desire."

"Action is what matters in this world," said Arjuna, "Action alone brings Success. I put Artha first."

"Without Desire there is neither Success nor Dharma," said Bhima.

Yudhishthira said, "Your conviction is impressive. But who in this world is completely free to act as he pleases? I act as fate ordains me to act. Neither Dharma, nor Artha, nor Kama should be one's goal. What matters is Moksha."

They applauded Yudhishthira, and approached Bhishma again.

"Noble Bhishma, how should one choose a friend?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Avoid one who's selfish, unforgiving, dishonest, mean, suspicious, idle, lazy, and scheming; avoid one who has given up the duties of his caste, who dishonours his guru, professes atheism, tells lies, and is a habitual gambler."

"Instruct me regarding the duties of a man during the four stages of his life," said Yudhishthira.

"Dharma has many doors. The duties ordained by one's dharma are never performed in vain. When a man loses his wealth, his wife or his son, let him say to himself, 'It's a great loss,' and let him learn to overcome his sorrow. Remember the Brahmin's words to King Senajit, 'What use is grief? Today you grieve over your dead son, tomorrow others grieve over you; and the day after, still others grieve over them. Like two planks of drifting wood meeting briefly on a stream, two people meet in life. Did you know your son? Did he know you? Who are you, for whom do you grieve?' No one has joy for ever, and no one suffers sorrow for ever."

"How should a good man behave in his daily life?" asked Yudhishthira.

"A good man does not excrete on main roads, in cow pens, and in paddy fields. He does not urinate facing the sun. His ablutions are performed with river water, and he does not stay in bed when the sun is up. He says his morning prayers facing the east, and his evening prayers facing the west. He eats food that tastes pleasant, and does not fuss over it. He does not sleep with wet feet. Once daily he goes round a holy image, a sacred spot, a bull, cow pen, a place where four roads meet, a noble Brahmin, or a sacred tree. He makes no distinctions, so far as food is concerned, between guests, relatives, and servants. He treats servants equally. He avoids other people's wives, and has intercourse only with his own. He does not eat unsanctified meat, and prefers those meat portions which are furthest from the animal's spine. He gives seating priority to his seniors. He does not look straight at the sun first thing in the morning, nor does he gaze at a naked woman if she happens to be another's wife. Whatever a good man does, even the touching of a cow's dung, becomes good. When he offers food, he should ask, 'Is this enough?' When he offers a drink, he should say, 'I hope you enjoy this.' When he offers sweetened milk and rice, or sweet barley gruel, or milk mixed with sesame, he should ask, 'Will this do?' Hiding his misdeeds from good men will not help a wrong-doer. The gods see what good men don't. An ill deed concealed by another ill deed begets more ill deeds. A good deed concealed by another good deed begets more good deeds. Like the four-armed Rahu swallowing the moon in eclipse, the consequences of ill deeds punctually devour their doer.

"Fulfilled desires bring joy; there is joy in heaven too; but both together do not equal one-sixteenth of the joy that lies in the death of desire.

"Like the tortoise pulling in his head and feet, pull in your desires! Then will the Atman shine, happy within you.

"Death is in the body; but so is immortality. Be ignorant, and you die. Seek truth, and you are immortal.

"Nothing sees like knowledge, nothing purifies like truth, nothing delights like giving, nothing enslaves like desire.

"Be poor: you will have no enemies. Be rich: you are in the jaws of death. I weighed poverty against riches; poverty won, it had more virtues.

"Giving up a little brings happiness, giving up a lot brings the Supreme; giving up a little drives away fear; giving up all brings serenity.

"Give up desires, creature of desire! Be disgusted with desire—and achieve peace.

"Knowledge is the greatest happiness, knowledge is the greatest possession and the greatest good.

"Truth is Brahman, Truth is penance, Truth is heaven. Truth is light, hell is darkness.

"Death and decay strike the world down. Days and nights slip by. Now is the time to look after yourself! Even before you finish, death pulls you down. Awake, arise! Or be for ever forgotten."

The Thirteenth Book:
The Last Advice

"How shall I achieve peace of mind?" asked Yudhishthira. "I have listened carefully to your words, but serenity escapes me. How is it possible to achieve serenity by listening to another man's wisdom? There are arrow wounds and sores on my body; I have killed my own kinsmen; I have killed even my guru. What is more painful than this? I think Brahma made man to do only wrong."

Bhishma replied, "What makes you think, Yudhishthira, that the Atman is responsible for all that a man does, especially his crimes? Remember the story of the fowler and the serpent?

"There was once an old lady named Gautami, renowned for her patience and serenity. One day she found her son dead of snake bite. The fowler Arjunaka trussed up the serpent and brought it before her. 'Shall I cut it in pieces, my lady, or shall I throw it in the fire?' he asked.

" 'Release him,' answered Gautami, 'Killing him won't revive my son. Letting him go free won't harm you.'

" 'You know the difference between right and wrong,' said Arjunaka. 'A noble soul is touched by the suffering of all creatures. I am not a noble soul, my lady—I'm a practical man. I'm going to kill this serpent. Give me permission to do so.'

" 'My son was destined to die,' said Gautami, 'I cannot give you permission. Be compassionate: forgive him and release him.'

" 'An enemy deserves to be killed,' the fowler argued. 'Killing an enemy brings merit in this life and the next.'

" 'Forgiving an enemy brings more merit,' said Gautami.

" 'Hundreds of others will be saved if we kill him,' the fowler said.

" 'But not my son,' said Gautami, and would not give in to the repeated requests of the fowler.

"The serpent sighed softly—the tight cords were hurting him—and spoke in a patient human voice, 'Foolish Arjunaka, what have I done? I have no free will, I committed no crime. The god of death Yama sent me to do what I did. Blame him for the boy's death, if you must.'

" 'That may be so, but you agreed to do it,' the fowler countered, 'so you are an accessory to the crime. The potter's wheel is the cause of the making of the pot, and you are the cause of the boy's death. You are guilty—you admit it—and he who is guilty dies at my hands.'

"The serpent said, 'The potter's wheel is not the complete cause of the making of the pot, and I am not the complete cause of the boy's death. Two or more causes can operate together. The explanation of cause and effect is a complex matter. I am guilty of no crime. My guilt is the result of joint causes.'

" 'I do not know about first and joint causes,' the fowler said, 'but I know that your bite killed the boy. Therefore, you deserve to die. Do you think that, when a sinful act is committed, the doer isn't involved in the act? Tell me, what do you think?'

" 'First cause or no, nothing happens without an intermediate cause,' the snake replied. 'In that sense you are right: I am the intermediate cause. If an intermediate cause can be guilty, I am guilty; but I think the real guilt should lie with the person who incited me to bite the boy.'

" 'You talk too much, wicked serpent,' the fowler said. 'You deserve to die. You know you are guilty of a little boy's murder.'

"At this point Yama himself appeared, and spoke to the serpent.

" 'I come here under the influence of Kala, lord of time,' he said. 'You are not guilty of the boy's death; neither am I. Like clouds moved by the wind, I am moved by Kala. All creatures are moved by Kala. The whole universe—its good, its bad, its changes and modifications, are moved by Kala. All existent and non-existent subjects are created and destroyed by Kala. If I am guilty, you are equally guilty.'

" 'That's not what I said,' the snake explained. 'I do not maintain that you are guilty, nor do I say that you are completely innocent. I only know that I operate under your influence. The blame may be Kala's; it is not for me to say so because I do not know whose blame it really is. I do know it is not entirely mine, and I think it is my duty to say it is not entirely yours.' He turned to Arjunaka. 'You have heard Yama. It is not right to torture me any longer by tying me up so tightly.'

" 'I have heard you, and I have heard him,' replied the fowler, 'and I am not convinced. Both of you seem guilty to me. A curse on Yama for killing innocent boys! I'll kill you both.'

" 'But we are not free agents,' said Yama, 'Kala moves us, as I explained earlier. Be sensible: examine the matter more carefully.'

" 'That's strange,' said the fowler. 'If Kala is the real culprit, what I would like to know is how we get pleasure from doing good and sorrow from doing wrong.'

"Kala appeared on the scene, and said to all three, 'Neither Yama, nor the snake, nor I am guilty. We are only the intermediate causes. Guilty is the boy's Karma; his Karma alone is responsible for his death. Karma rules us all. Karma can help us to work out our salvation, by indicating what is wicked or virtuous in us. Men mould what they like from lumps of clay, and Karma moulds men in various ways. As light and shadow depend on each other, men's actions depend on Karma. Not you, not I, not Yama, not the snake, not the old lady—none of these is guilty of the boy's death. He himself alone is guilty of his own death.'

"Gautami, satisfied that men suffer according to their Karma, said ~~to~~ Arjunaka, 'You may go. I am satisfied.'

"They all went back to their respective places," Bhishma said to Yudhishthira, "and the minds of Gautami and the fowler were at peace. So you see, Yudhishthira, it's Karma that governs us all. The evil isn't your fault, and it isn't Duryodhana's. Karma slew all these heroes on the battlefield of Kurukshetra."

Yudhishthira's mind was consoled, and he asked the next question:

"Which men are most worthy of respect? I could listen to you endlessly, for your words are full of wisdom."

Bhishma replied, "That question reminds me of Krishna's question to Narada when he found Narada paying his respects to a group of noble Brahmins. He asked, 'Which of these Brahmins do you respect most, and why?'

"And Narada replied, 'I respect those most who study the Vedas, practise penance, honour the gods and never boast about it; those who are forgiving, austere, self-restrained, and truthful; those who live in the forest, feed on roots, shoots and fruits and, like pigeons, have no fear of what tomorrow will bring them. I respect men who are hospitable to guests, who look after their servants, and eat food only after it has been offered to the gods. I respect people who have compassion, detachment and probity. Such people spread happiness in this life and the next.' "

"Instruct me regarding the merit of sheltering those in distress," said Yudhishthira.

"Listen to this old story," said Bhishma. "Once upon a time, a hawk chased a beautiful pigeon which flew down and sought the protection of King Vrishadarbha. The king of Varanasi placed the bird in his lap, and said, 'Why are you trembling? You are safe with me. Have no fear. What a lovely colour you are, the colour of a newly-budded blue lotus—and your eyes are the soft pink of a pomegranate. Don't be afraid. I promise you: I will give up my kingdom if necessary in order to protect you.'

"But the hawk said, 'This pigeon is mine by right. I chased him through the sky and he belongs to me. You have no right to take him away from me, O king. Thirst and hunger make me desperate. Give him to me! Your duty is to look after the welfare of your subjects, not to deprive hungry hawks of their rightful prey. Look, where my talons have grazed and wounded him. Your royal power may extend to your enemies, servants, relatives, and subjects, but it has no authority over the creatures of the sky. If you must think of saving the pigeon's life, why not see that I don't go hungry either?'

"Impressed by the hawk's arguments, the king said, 'Dress a bull, boar, deer or buffalo—whatever he chooses—for the hawk's sake. Let that cool your thirst and hunger. But the bird does not leave my lap. I have vowed to protect anyone who asks for my help.'

" 'Boar meat, bull meat, buffalo meat and venison don't agree with me,' said the hawk. 'I live on pigeons. Nature made me that way. But if you love the bird so much, give me instead a slice of flesh from your own body, equal in weight to the pigeon.'

" 'Agreed,' said King Vrishadarbha.

"He quickly cut off a chunk of flesh from his body and placed it against the pigeon on a weighing balance. From the inner apartments of the palace came the sound of loud wailing from the king's jewel-adorned wives. The courtiers and servants also cried loudly, and the palace echoed with cloud-booming noise. The clear sky was suddenly overcast with clouds. The earth shook, in homage to the king's virtuous act. The king continued to slice off flesh from his arms, legs, and thighs, filling the scales, but they would not turn against the pigeon's weight. Finally, when nothing was left of him except a bony skeleton, he climbed into the pan himself.

"Indra came to witness the deed. Invisible beings in the sky played on kettledrums; fragrant celestial flowers dropped on the king's head. The Gandharvas and Apsaras sang and danced around him in groups as they do around Brahma. He was placed in a chariot of pure gold, whose arches were also of gold and studded with diamonds, whose columns were of lapis lazuli, and he ascended to heaven. The three worlds sang the praises of the king of Varanasi.

"Recite this story, Yudhishthira, whenever you can; it will cleanse you of blame. And be like Vrishadarbha."

"How should one go about selecting a proper husband for one's daughter?" asked Yudhishthira.

"Make discreet enquiries about his age, character and conduct, his education and accomplishments. That's what good Brahmins do, and marriage performed with these preliminaries is known as the Brahma marriage. A Kshatriya father, having selected a man, uses the persuasion of many gifts and presents, to make him marry his daughter. A Gandharva marriage is one in which the father of the girl marries her to a husband of her own choice. In an Asura marriage, the girl is bought for a high price and her relatives bribed with money and gifts. The Rakshasa marriage is so called because the bridegroom runs away with the girl after killing her weeping relatives. The Brahma, Kshatriya and Gandharva, in pure or mixed form, are recommended by the scriptures, but the Asura and Rakshasa cannot be approved. A Brahmin can marry three wives, a Kshatriya two, a Vaishya one, and she must belong to his own caste. The children of all wives should be treated as equals. Of a Brahmin's three wives, the one who belongs to his caste should be treated as superior; this also applies to a Kshatriya's two wives. Some say that members of the three higher castes may marry Shudra wives for purposes of enjoyment; others forbid this. A girl marries on reaching puberty or later. A girl who has no father and brothers should not be married. If a girl is not married at puberty, or within three years after that, she should choose a husband for herself, and not wait for her family to do so. The children of such a girl deserve equal respect with other children. If, however, she refuses to choose a husband for herself, she incurs serious reproach."

"If, after receiving the betrothal present, the girl's father finds a man he thinks will make a better husband for her, and refuses the first suitor, does he incur blame?" asked Yudhishthira.

"The present is a token, and does not give the status of wife to an unmarried girl," replied Bhishma. "It may be considered as the price of the girl. Such 'presents' are only given when the would-be bridegroom doesn't have qualifications that would entitle him to marry in the normal way. Wives are not bought and sold. Those who think they are, know nothing of the scriptures. Stay away from such men. A wife should never be bought. A father should never sell his daughter. For marriage is an indissoluble, holy bond, sanctified at the seventh step of the circling round the sacred fire.

"When Manu went to heaven, he handed over the charge of women to men, explaining that they were weak and gullible, and needed to be protected. He explained how quickly they responded to love, and how attached they were to Dharma I do not say they don't have malicious, greedy, fierce, unlovable, and stubborn specimens among them. But they deserve our highest respect. Honour them, O men. Your goodness depends on them, your pleasures and delights depend on them. Serve them, respect them, listen to their advice—for, as wives and mothers, they constitute the guardians of the morals of society. Didn't a princess in the palace of King Janaka say, 'Women perform no rituals, no funeral ceremonies, and observe no fasts. They serve differently—by loving and obeying their husbands—and through such service they obtain heaven.' When she is a child, her father protects her; when she marries, her husband protects her; when she becomes old, her sons protect her. When is she ever free? Therefore, honour her and cherish her, for she is Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, and by honouring her you honour the goddess herself."

"Which brings the highest merit—ahimsa, observance of ritual, meditation, control of the senses, asceticism, or obedience to a guru?" Yudhishthira asked Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods, who had descended from heaven to listen to Bhishma's words.

"All bring merit, all lead to Dharma," replied Brihaspati. "Let me explain what the greatest Dharma is. There is nothing more virtuous than all-embracing compassion. A man with compassion is a man without lust, anger, and greed. Such a man looks at everything and everybody as if they were his own self. Never should a man do to another what he would not want another do to him; this is the essence of all Dharma. When you hurt another, he turns and hurts you: when you love another, he turns and loves you."

Saying this, Brihaspati ascended to heaven before the very eyes of the assembled Pandava heroes.

Turning to Bhishma lying on his bed of arrows, Yudhishthira said: "Compassion as the essence of Dharma I understand. But what I want to know is how a man, guilty of injury committed in thought, word and deed, can cleanse himself."

"A fall from compassion is always a moral fall," said Bhishma. "Just as an elephant's footprint engulfs the footprints of all other animals, compassion engulfs all forms of religion. Immoral thought, word and deed make a person fall from Dharma; therefore, a return to Dharma is to be pure again in thought, pure again in word, and finally pure again in deed.

"Ahimsa is the highest religion,
Ahimsa the highest discipline,
Ahimsa is the highest penance,
Ahimsa the highest sacrifice.
Ahimsa is the highest happiness,
Ahimsa the highest truth,
Gift, ritual, ablution, holy merit—
None is greater that Ahimsa"

"All these heroes who gave their lives in the great battle—what happens to them, what do they get as reward?" asked Yudhishthira. "Life is not easy to give up, even in a war. Tell me, O Bhishma, for you know everything."

"No matter what the conditions, joyful or sorrowful, prosperous or adverse, each creature's life has a distinct tonal quality. You have asked an excellent question, Yudhishthira," said Bhishma. "Let me tell you the story of the island-born Vyasa and the humble worm. A long time ago, Vyasa happened to look down as he was walking on a road where hundreds of chariots passed daily and he saw a worm furiously slithering away. The great sage, speaking in the worm's tongue, asked, 'Why the hurry, worm? What are you afraid of?'

" 'The clatter of the chariot, sir,' replied the worm. 'It's near! I hear it! It will crush me. I must run, I must get out of the way.

I hear the snorting of the chariot bulls, I hear the whip lashing their backs. Life's precious, sir—I don't intend to die if I can help it, and go from the heaven of life to the hell of death.'

" 'But you're only a worm,' said Vyasa. 'What do you know of the heaven of life? The joys of sound, touch, taste, and scent mean little to you. You'd be happier dead.'

" 'Well, sir,' said the worm, 'in spite of what you say, I happen to like living as I am. I've got used to it, and I enjoy it, I may be only a worm, but I have my little enjoyments. In my last life I was a wealthy Shudra. But I didn't care for Brahmins, I had a vile temper; I was cruel and foul-mouthed; I swindled many friends. The sight of others prospering drove me mad with jealousy—I hated their wealth, their corn, their houses, their lovely wives. But I loved my mother, sir, and once I even reverently fed a Brahmin who came as a wandering guest to my house. And in my old age I did repent all my wild deeds of youth, as a father repents the loss of a dear son. I remember that clearly, and I think I will one day achieve my liberation as a result of the merits of my few good deeds.'

" 'Penance goes a long way, worm, in helping a creature to achieve liberation from life,' said Vyasa. 'If your mind is bent on Dharma, you will achieve it sooner or later. If you like, I can change your condition now.'

"The worm agreed. At that moment a large chariot passed by and one of its wheels crushed the worm. Passing quickly through various incarnations—hedgehog, iguana, bear, deer, and bird, outcaste, Shudra, and Vaishya—he emerged as a Kshatriya, and, falling with folded palms at Vyasa's feet, touched them with his head.

"Finally, the worm rose to the status of Brahmin and, completing his process of liberation, reached the state of Brahman.

"Do not grieve, Yudhishthira, for the dead heroes. They too have reached the heaven they deserve.

"What matters is the quality of living. Water poured on salt dissolves it; similarly, penance on an ill deed washes it away.

"Never hide guilt. Hidden, it multiplies. Confessed in front of good men, it taints no more.

"A few final words of advice: Look after the following people well, especially if they are poor—an old man, a relative, a friend, a widowed sister, a teacher, a high-born person, and a learned man.

"Avoid jealousy. It's a great shortener of life.

"Bathe in the deep and pure waters of your mind's wisdom. Moderate opinion with truth.

"Thousands of irritations daily afflict the ignorant man, thousands of fears haunt him. The wise man remains unaffected.

"Nowhere is perfect and absolute happiness to be found, not even in the heaven of Indra.

"All that you collect, decays; all that rises, falls; all unions end in separation; around the corner of life is death.

"There is endless trouble getting wealth, endless trouble guarding it; endless trouble if it is stolen, endless trouble if it's spent.

"Let us pay homage to the thousand-formed Brahma: he has a thousand feets, eyes, heads and hands; he has a thousand names, and thousands of millions of yugas are held within him."

Bhishma stopped speaking, and the Pandavas sat around him in grave silence, motionless, like painted figures.

Vyasa said, "Yudhishthira is satisfied, O Bhishma. He bows his head to you. Give him permission to return to the city."

Bhishma said gently, "You may go, Yudhishthira. Cool the fever in your heart. Look after your subjects. Your friends and your people depend on you, as birds depend on a large fruit tree growing in a sacred place. Come to me when the time of my death approaches, when the sun pauses in his southern solatice and turns northwards."

Placing Dhritarashtra and Gandhari at the head, accompanied by Krishna and many holy men, and followed by advisers and citizens, Yudhishthira set out for Hastinapura. Reaching the city, he ordered them to go to their homes, and gave lavish consolatory presents to the women whose husbands and sons had died in the battle. With the performance of innumerable good acts he earned the goodwill of his military officers and his subjects, and the blessings of his Brahmins. After fifty days, as the sun stopped in its southern course and began to move north, Yudhishthira made preparations to visit Bhishma. With him went priests carrying scents, garlands, silken clothes, ghee, sandalwood and dark aloe wood for the funeral pyre. With him also were Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, Yuyutsu, other relatives and a host of followers, including poets and minstrels.

They came where Bhishma lay on his bed of arrows, guarded by specially appointed soldiers. Yudhishthira bowed and said:

"I am Yudhishthira. I salute you, O noble Bhishma, my grandfather. If you can hear me, instruct me on my duty now."

Bhishma opened his eyes and saw all of them clustered around him. He took Yudhishthira's hand, and said in a clear, deep voice, "I am fortunate, Yudhishthira. The sun has begun his journey north. I have been lying here for fifty-eight days, but these sharp arrows made them feel like a hundred years."

He turned to Dhritarashtra. "To you, Dhritarashtra, who know all the duties described in the scriptures, I say only this: Do not grieve. All this had to happen. Yudhishthira is a virtuous king—he will be obedient to you. Do not grieve for your jealous sons."

To Krishna he said, "I told him repeatedly to make peace, but Duryodhana would not listen. Having laid waste the earth, he is dead. Give me leave, Krishna, to cast off my body: the hour of my death is come."

He said to all those gathered round him, "I wish to die. Give me leave to do so. My friends, strive for truth: there is nothing higher than Truth." And to Yudhishthira, "Surround yourself with wise Brahmins to advise you in government and in dharma."

Then he was silent, and they watched while he successively manoeuvred his life-breaths as recommended by Yoga. As the life-breaths rose to his head, the wounds on his body healed one by one. It was strange; they stood, marvelling. Then the life-breaths, unable to escape through any of the arrow-pierced outlets, gathered in the head and, shooting through the crown, proceeded to heaven. Divine kettledrums were heard, and flowery showers fell on his body. Shooting through the sky like a bright meteor, the life-breaths finally faded and were lost to sight.

Vidura and the Pandavas constructed a vast pyre, while Yuyutsu and the others stood by. Yudhishthira and Vidura wrapped Bhishma's body in silken cloth and scattered flowers on it. Yuyutsu held an umbrella over it; Bhima and Arjuna fanned it with two white yak tails. Nakula and Sahadeva stood near, holding the head coverings. Then Yudhishthira and Dhritarashtra began fanning the body with palm leaf fans Libations were poured in the sacred fire. Priests chanted hymns from the Vedas. Placing sandal and alce wood on the body, they lit the funeral pyre.

The Fourteenth Book: The Horse Sacrifice

After Dhritarashtra had offered the water libations to Bhishma's ancestors, Yudhishthira slumped down beside the bank of the Ganga, like an elephant fatally pierced by a hunter's arrow; his eyes filled with tears. Prompted by Krishna, Bhima helped him up.

"No, no, Yudhishthira," said Krishna, worried by his constant sighing.

The Pandavas surrounded Yudhishthira, and Dhritarashtra, still oppressed by grief for the deaths of his sons, said, "Rise, Yudhishthira. It is I and Gandhari who should mourn, not you: we have lost a hundred sons. Attend to your duties: the kingdom awaits your authority."

Yudhishthira rose, and they went to Hastinapura.

In the capital Arjuna passed his time sporting with Krishna, doing nothing except enjoying himself. One day they were walking inside the magnificent palace when Arjuna said, "O Krishna, your greatness was revealed to me on the eve of the battle when you showed me your Universal Form. But the words you said to me then I have completely forgotten. I have often wondered about them. And now you will be leaving me and going away to Dvaraka."

Krishna embraced him affectionately and said, "I told you truths which to many are profound mysteries. I enlightened you on the nature of Dharma. I am surprised that nothing of what I said then has remained in your memory; I could not now recall what I said then, even if I wished. How will I get all the details right?"

They approached Yudhishthira, and Arjuna said, "Krishna has been away from home for a long time. He wishes to go and see his father Vasudeva, and he seeks your permission."

"By all means go," said Yudhishthira. "Go this very day and convey to my maternal uncle our respects on our behalf."

Arjuna embraced Krishna warmly, and kept looking at him as he slowly disappeared in the distance, on his way to Dvaraka, the capital of his tribe known as the Yadavas.

During his journey he came to a desert, where he met the great ascetic, Utanka. They greeted each other.

"Were you able to bring about an honourable peace between the Kauravas and the Pandavas?" asked Utanka. "Have you fulfilled the high hopes I had in you?"

"I did my best, holy one," replied Krishna. "But I did not succeed in getting them to compromise. The Kauravas are dead. They refused to listen to the good advice of Bhishma and Vidura. The five Pandavas are alive; but their children are dead."

Anger suffused Utanka; his eyes expanded, and he said, "I will curse you, Krishna, because you failed to look after the interests of your own relatives. You could have forced the Pandavas to make peace and prevented the slaughter, but you didn't. You didn't care for the Kauravas, for which reason they are now all dead."

"Holy one, listen to me," said Krishna. "I am sorry for what happened, but before you curse me, let me explain. It will take much ascetic penance to curse me. I know you have it, but I would not like to see your power pitted against mine. . . .The three gunas of sattva, rajas and tamas—light, passion, and ignorance—draw sustenance from me. All creatures exist in me, and I exist in all creatures. Don't make any mistake about that. The gandharvas, nagas, rakshasas and apsaras have all sprung from me. Whatever exists or does not exist, whatever's seen or not seen, whatever's destructible or indestructible has value because I give it value.".

"I have heard of your glory, O Krishna," said Utanka. "I will not curse you. Grace me with a glimpse of your All-Powerful Form."

Krishna revealed his Vishnu Form. It had the light of a thousand suns; it had faces on all sides.

"Ask for a boon," Krishna said.

"A sight of your All-Powerful Form is boon enough," said Utanka.

"Ask. I order you to ask."

"O Krishna, give me the boon of obtaining water whenever I want it. Water is scarce in this desert," said Utanka.

"When you want water, think of me." With these words, Krishna continued his journey to Dvaraka, and Utanka proceeded to cross the desert.

One day in the desert, the thirsty Utanka saw a fierce-looking naked outcaste hunter, armed with a sword and bow and arrows, and surrounded by a pack of dogs. From his penis issued a ceaseless stream of water. The moment Utanka thought of Krishna, the hunter said, "Take this water from me. I know you are thirsty, and I feel sorry for you."

But Utanka refused, and began silently to malign Krishna.

"Drink!" the hunter said repeatedly, but the only response he received from the thirsty Utanka was mounting anger. He and his dogs vanished into thin air.

Later, in the course of his wanderings Utanka chanced across Krishna and asked, "Was it right, O Krishna, to offer me water in the form of an outcaste's urine?"

Krishna replied softly, "What was done was proper. You missed the meaning. When you thought of me, I interceded on your behalf to Indra, and he said, 'No mortal should be given a taste of immortal nectar, but since you ask me, I shall go to him disguised as a hunter. If he drinks, good; it not, he will never have it offered to him again.' But you would not drink because an outcaste offered it to you. You made a great mistake. All you will get now when you think of me is water from desert clouds."

Accompanied by Satyaki, Krishna hurried to Dvaraka. When he arrived, after crossing many lakes, rivers and forests, the Raivataka festival had begun. The Raivataka hill was adorned with gems and golden garlands; strings of flowers decorated its trees, and lighted lamps hung from poles, making day and night lovely. Flags waved, and small bells tinkled; community songs filled the air. The music that rose from the Raivataka hill seemed to fill the very sky. All around were shops selling goods and food stalls offering the choicest dishes and wines. Gifts were constantly made to the blind, distressed, and helpless.

Krishna entered the palace, and embraced his father and mother. The Yadavas surrounded him, washed his feet, and made him comfortable; after which, his father put him many questions about his experiences in the war.

Krishna narrated the entire course of the battle, but omitted the episode of Abhimanyu's death. His sister Subhadra said, "Tell me how my son died, Krishna." His father Vasudeva said, "You are known for truth-speaking, Krishna. Why do you hide this from us?"

"Do not grieve, my sister," Krishna said, "for what happened had to happen. Though I, Satyaki and Yudhishthira protected him, he was killed. O my sister of restless glances, lotus-eyed Subhadra, do not mourn for Abhimanyu. Think instead of his wife Uttara, who is pregnant. You will soon get a grandson." He consoled Uttara also, saying, "For the sake of your husband, take good care of the child in your womb."

When the time of the horse sacrifice drew near, Krishna, accompanied by the Yadavas, returned to Hastinapura. Uttara gave birth while Krishna was staying in Hastinapura; as a result of Ashvatthaman's curse, however, her son, the royal Parikshit, was born dead.

Hearing sounds of lamentation, Krishna hurried to the inner apartments. He saw his aunt Kunti, between loud sobbing, asking for him. Behind her were Draupadi, Subhadra and other palace wives, all weeping profusely.

"Save us, Krishna, for only you can," Kunti sobbed. "Your sister has had a stillborn son. Revive him. Remember you promised to do so when Ashvatthaman changed the blade of grass into a deadly Brahma-weapon."

"Very well," said Krishna. His words cheered them, like cold water refreshing a weary man. He entered the child-birth room. He ordered it to be sanctified with garlands of white flowers, and water jars filled to the brim; with *tinduka* wood and mustard seed soaked in ghee; with shining weapons and small fires in every corner.

Uttara covered herself modestly and waited for Krishna. The ladies raised her into a sitting position on the bed; she folded her palms, and reverently paid homage to the lotus-eyed Krishna. He touched water, and neutralised the power of Ashvatthaman's Brahma-weapon.

He said, "By all the merits that I have honourably earned, I ask that life return to this child! Because Dharma is dear to me, because Brahmins are dear to me, I ask that life return to Abhimanyu's son! As the slayer of Kamsa and Keshi, I ask that life return to this boy!"

No sooner had he finished speaking than Parikshit began to stir; the baby moved his arms and legs faintly. A strong white light filled the room. The rakshasas fled. The ladies rejoiced. Speaking to Vyasa, Yudhishthira said, "Give me permission to dedicate all my treasure and wealth to the performance of the great ritual known as the horse sacrifice."

"You have my permission," said Vyasa. "Propitiate the gods with profuse gifts. The horse sacrifice is a great cleanser of the consequences of ill deeds."

The sacrificial animals were tied according to custom. Vyasa personally set free the sacred horse. After the initiation, Yudhishthira, with a golden garland round his neck, shone like a rich fire: his upper garment was a black deer skin, he held a staff in one hand, and a shawl of red silk was draped over his shoulders.

Arjuna got ready to follow the sacred horse, whose skin was the colour of a black deer. He lifted his bow, and showed his hand armour of iguana skin. The adults and children of Hastinapura flocked to the streets to see the ceremony. "There's Arjuna!" they shouted. "There's the sacred horse!" Some blessed him. Others complained, "Where is he? We can't see him. We see only his bow lifted high above the heads of the crowd. May he be safe. We shall welcome him when he returns triumphant."

The horse roamed over the whole earth. From the north it turned to the east. Arjuna followed in his white-horsed chariot, subduing kingdoms wherever he went. Many kings who had lost their kinsmen on Kurukshetra opposed him: Kiratas, Greeks, Mlecchas, and Aryan heroes. Many furious battles took place.

The first battle fought was with the mighty chariot warriors of Dhritavarman, the Trigartas, who surrounded Arjuna as soon as he entered their kingdom. When Arjuna killed eighteen of their finest heroes, they fled, and king Dhritavarman surrendered.

The sacred horse entered the country called Pragjyotisha, where Arjuna faced the army of Bhagadatta's son, King Vajradatta. The battle raged for three days. On the fourth day Vajradatta laughed and said, "You will die at my hands, Arjuna!" But Arjuna shot him down with a flaming arrow; he fell like a falling cliff. "I will spare you, but on one condition – that you attend the horse sacrifice of Raja Yudhishthira during the full moon of April." Vajradatta agreed.

Next Arjuna fought and subdued the hundreds of Saindhavas, a large number of whose people had been killed in Kurukshetra. Shouting their names and proclaiming their feats, they rushed against him, but he stood as firm as the Himalayas. Their queen, Duhshala, daughter of Dhritarashtra, and wife of Jayadratha, took her grandson in her arms and went to meet Arjuna. Arjuna saw her weeping, and dropped his Gandiva bow. "This boy is the son of my son, Suratha. He is the son of your sister's son, Arjuna. He has come to pay you respect. Look at him," she said.

"Where is Suratha?" asked Arjuna.

"Dead. He died when he heard you were here," Duhshala replied. "He died of a broken heart, for he knew that you had killed his father Jayadratha. I now bring you his son, and I seek your protection."

Arjuna looked fixedly at the ground. Great sorrow afflicted him.

"I am your sister," she said. "You will not refuse me. As Parikshit is to your son Abhimanyu, this boy is to my son Suratha. I have come to plead for the lives of my people."

He embraced her, and asked her to return to the palace. Then he made peace with the Saindhavas.

The sacred horse wandered at will through many kingdoms, bringing glory to Arjuna, until it came to the kingdom of Vabhruvahana, who was Arjuna's son by Chitrangada and ruler of Manipura.

Learning of his father's arrival within his kingdom, Vabhruvahana went out to meet him; he brought expensive presents with him, and a large number of Brahmins accompanied him to perform the welcoming ceremony.

But Arjuna angrily said, "What kind of foolishness is this? Have you forgotten your Kshatriya duties? I come here as the protector of Yudhishthira's sacred horse. Why do you refuse to fight me? Here I come, ready to do battle with my son, and he, like a timid woman, receives me with open arms! Did I come here weaponless? What right have you, wretched idiot of a king, to welcome me peacefully?"

Arjuna's Naga wife Ulupi, the lovely-limbed daughter of the underworld snake king, unable to bear these words, shot out of the earth and stood before her step-son, Vabhruvahana, who looked sad and crestfallen.

"Listen to me: I am your mother. Fight Arjuna, my son, for it seems that alone will please him," she said.

She slowly persuaded him to accept Arjuna's challenge. He put on gold armour and, mounting a chariot loaded with a hundred quivers, flying the banner of the golden lion, he advanced to meet his father in battle.

Laughing, he shot an arrow which pierced the diadem-crowned Arjuna in the shoulder like a snake burrowing through an anthill.

"Excellent! Excellent!" exclaimed Arjuna. "And now I will shoot arrows at you. Don't run away!"

The first arrow cut the flagstaff, the others slew the chariot horses. Vabhruvahana, his eyes flaming, got down from his chariot and fought his father on foot. Casually he fired a sharp, specially feathered arrow. It hit Arjuna in his chest; he fell in great pain, and fainted.

Partly from shock at his father's fall and partly from the impact of the shower of arrows that Arjuna had hurled against him, Vabhruvahana also fell down in a deep swoon.

Hearing that her husband and son had both collapsed, Chitrangada hurried to the field of battle, weeping piteously and trembling all over.

She said to Ulupi, "Look, Ulupi, our husband has been killed by my son. Do you call yourself a devoted wife, Ulupi? For it is you who caused your husband's death by inciting my son to fight him. If Arjuna offended you in any way, forgive him. I beg of you, forgive him and give him back his life. It is strange that your husband's death leaves you unmoved. For I grieve not so much for my dead son as for my dead husband." She knelt beside Arjuna, and said again to Ulupi, "Blame does not attach to a man if he marries more than one wife; blame attaches only to a woman if she marries more than one husband. Do not take revenge on Arjuna for his polygamy. If you do not revive him, I will sit here and fast to death." She placed Arjuna's head on her lap, sighed deeply, and closed her eyes.

Meanwhile Vabhruvahana, recovering consciousness, saw his mother sitting with Arjuna's head on her lap.

"My father dead, my mother sitting on the bare ground – what could be more painful than this sight!" he said. "Look, O Brahmins, at his golden armour: look at him, a father killed by his own son. Punish me, for I have killed my own father. Make me wander over the earth, to expiate my horrible deed. Slice his head in two, and let me carry the halves in my hands, for there is no other expiation for me. Be happy, Ulupi—I have done what you wanted me to do." He sighed, then spoke again, "O listen to me! All you creatures, big and small, moving and unmoving, listen to me! Listen to me, mother. Listen to me, daughter of the snake king. What I say is the truth. If my father does not revive, I will starve myself to death on this battlefield." Determined, he sat down next to his mother, and closed his eyes.

Ulupi remembered the gem that had the power of reviving a dead man; and immediately as she recalled it, it arrived on the field. She picked it up.

"Rise, my son," she said, "and do not grieve. All that you saw was an illusion, wrought by me for the benefit of your father Arjuna. He has discovered your prowess. Take this gem, and place it on his chest."

Vabhruvahana did so, and Arjuna revived instantly, opening his eyes, red as if from a long sleep.

"I must now go," said Arjuna, "but I will see all of you again at the horse sacrifice."

Honoured by his son and obtaining his wives' permission, he went away, following the sacred horse.

Having wandered through the kingdoms along the coast, the horse turned his face in the direction of Hastinapura. At Rajgriha, he stopped, and Arjuna gave battle to the son of Sahadeva, ruler of that city.

Subduing him, Arjuna moved further south, to the city of the Chedis, called Shuktimati. Here Sarabha, the son of Shishupala, was defeated by him.

From there, Arjuna went to the territory of the Dasharnas, and subdued its ruler. Then he proceeded to the kingdom of the Nishadas, ruled by the valiant son of Ekalavya, whom also he subdued. Next was the kingdom of Gandharva, ruled by the son of Shakuni, who harboured bitter memories of Arjuna. Forbidden by the queen mother to continue the battle, the son of Shakuni accepted Arjuna's instructions to appear in the court of Yudhishthira on the full moon night of April and take part in the horse sacrifice. "You are my cousin," said Arjuna, "and for the sake of Gandhari, and for the sake of Dhritarashtra, I have spared your life."

The sacred horse turned its face toward Hastinapura. Messengers brought Yudhishthira the news of Arjuna's arrival in the kingdom.

He said to Bhima, "Your younger brother has returned with the sacred horse. The full moon night has come. Ask the Brahmins to choose a proper place for the horse sacrifice."

Bhima, happy that the curly-haired Arjuna had returned, began to supervise the construction of buildings and pavilions required for the sacrifice. Brahmins selected the spot; wide roads were made, and houses and mansions built round it. The ground was levelled, and daises raised of gold, encrusted with gems and diamonds. Golden columns and triumphal arches rose on all sides. Many mansions were constructed for the exclusive use of Brahmin guests.

Bhima sent messengers to all the kings of the earth with invitations to the horse sacrifice. They came, bringing with them ornaments, horses, weapons, and female slaves; and Yudhishthira provided them with the lavish hospitality of luxurious beds and the choicest foods and wines.

The horse sacrifice commenced with elaborate polemics between eloquent logicians and philosophers, disputing the nature and cause of reality. The invited kings saw nothing in the sacred place that was not made of gold—water jars, cauldrons, jugs, lids, and covers, even the sacrificial stakes. The compound was filled with cows and buffaloes, wheat and corn, and heaps of expensive sweets. A hundred thousand Brahmins were first fed, while drums and cymbals sounded. Hills of food, tanks of curd, and lakes of ghee were consumed.

While the feasting went on, messengers announced the arrival of Arjuna in the city. Vabhruvahana, accompanied by Chitrangada and Ulupi, also arrived at this time. Kunti gave her daughters-in-law costly presents; so did Draupadi and Subhadra.

On the third day began the actual sacrifice, and Vyasa instructed Yudhishthira to give *dakshina* to the priests and Brahmins present. Six stakes of *bilva* wood were planted, six of *khadiva* wood, and six of *saravavarnin*; two stakes were of deodar, and one of *sleshmataka* Many other stakes of pure gold were planted for decorative purposes. Fine cloths covered them, and they shone like Indra and the seven sages of heaven. Golden bricks were used for making a decorative, four-layered structure. A golden bird, in the shape of Garuda, was carved and hammered out. Then the priests tied animals and birds to the stakes, each assigned to its respective god. Altogether three hundred animals, including the sacred horse, were tied in this fashion.

Yudhishthira distributed a thousand crores of gold coins to Brahmins, and to Vyasa he presented the whole earth. Vyasa accepted it with these words, "What you give me I accept, and I return it to you. The earth is yours; give me gold." Yudhishthira gave him gold coins worth three times the amount recommended in the scriptures. Vyasa divided the sum in four equal parts, and gave it to the sacrificial priests. The invited kings were given presents of gems and diamonds, elephants, horses, and gold ornaments, clothes and female slaves. Having satisfied all according to the requirements of status and merit, Yudhishthira declared the sacrifice over.

Flowers were raining from the sky on Yudhishthira's head when a blue-eyed mongoose, with half his body golden-coloured, suddenly appeared and said in a loud, clear voice: "This great horse sacrifice, O kings, is not worth a single grain of rice given by a virtuous Brahmin after the completion of his penance."

Surprised, they said, "Who are you? What do you mean?"

The mongoose smiled and replied, "What I say is the truth. The whole of the glorious horse sacrifice is not worth a single grain of rice offered in humble devotion. Those were my words. What good is a huge sacrifice made with impure motives? Sincere penance is always greater than pompous piety."

Saying which, he disappeared.

The Fifteenth Book:
The Ashrama

The Pandavas ruled the kingdom for fifteen years, always acting on the advice of Dhritarashtra. Vidura, Sanjaya and Yuyutsu waited patiently on him. They would all gather round his feet; and he would smell their heads affectionately. Draupadi, Subhadra, and the other Pandava ladies treated Dhritarashtra and Gandhari as their own father-in-law and mother-in-law. Expensive gifts were constantly made by Yudhishthira to the blind monarch. Vyasa would often come and recite the legends of holy sages. When Dhritarashtra exercised his powers of clemency on criminals condemned to death, Yudhishthira did not object. Wine, fish, sherbet and honey were brought before him every day. Yudhishthira's instructions were simple: the sonless Dhritarashtra must never be made to feel unhappy, every whim of his was to be satisfied. All of them obeyed, except Bhima. Bhima had not forgotten that Dhritarashtra permitted the gambling match which began it all. Unwillingly he agreed, but he only played at pleasing Dhritarashtra.

None of the subjects suspected any lack of love between the blind monarch and the Pandavas, but secretly Bhima made his irritation known and felt. He bribed servants to disobey Dhritarashtra. One day, in the presence of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, he slapped his arm-pits in defiance. Unable to suppress his hatred, he said, "These arms of mine have finished off the blind king's sons. They are iron maces, these arms of mine. They send all fools to their death."

Gandhari ignored the words, but Dhritarashtra was deeply hurt, and, at the end of fifteen years, a profound despair and weariness overtook him. He did not say a word of this to any of the Pandavas. But because he loved Nakula and Sahadeva specially—for they looked after him with great care—he told them once:

"It was my own folly that destroyed the Kauravas. I was a fool to make Duryodhana king. Fifteen years have passed, and I must expiate my sin before it is too late. I eat little these days: I eat to somehow stay alive; None knows this except Gandhari. My attendants think I eat normally. I dare not tell Yudhishthira for fear of hurting him. Sometimes, wearing only deerskin, I lie on the ground covered with thin *kusha* grass and pass my time in meditation. Gandhari does the same. We have lost a hundred sons. . . . But we do not mourn for them, for they died like brave

Kshatriyas."

One day he said to Yudhishthira, "Listen to me carefully. I bless you, Yudhishthira, for making me comfortable here these fifteen years. I have passed them happily. But now I want your permission to retire to the woods, dressed in bark cloth, in the company of Gandhari. I will pass my life there, blessing you. We are old now: our children should rule in our place. You will share in our penance too, my son, for it is said that a king shares in everything that happens in his kingdom."

"Kingship for me will have no taste if you go, grieving in this fashion," said Yudhishthira. "My kingdom is a disease, and I am its victim. I am not the king—you are the king, I depend on you. I had imagined that by gentleness and obedience I could soothe the fever in your heart."

"I have made up my mind. It is best for my people that I retire to the woods," said Dhritarashtra.

Trembling a little, he said to Sanjaya and Kripa, "Persuade him on my behalf. My mind is joyless, my tongue tasteless. I cannot argue. I am an old man."

All life seemed suddenly to leave him. Alarmed, Yudhishthira thought, "A king, once as strong as an elephant, now leans on a woman! A king, who once crushed the iron image of Bhima with his bare hands, now leans on a woman! Shame on me for letting this happen. Shame on my wisdom and my dharma! If he and Gandhari decide to fast, I will fast also."

With his own hand, Yudhishthira applied cold water on Dhritarashtra's face and chest; at the touch of Yudhishthira's hand, auspicious with jewels and scented with medicinal herbs, the old monarch seemed to revive.

Vyasa said to Yudhishthira, "Let him have his desire. He is old and without sons. He does not have long to live."

"Because you are our guru, I respect you as a son would respect a father," said Yudhishthira. "I will follow your advice."

With Yudhishthira's permission, Dhritarashtra, followed by Gandhari, went to his palace. He walked slowly and with difficulty, like an old leader of an elephant herd. He performed the morning rituals and took a little food. The Pandavas came and sat round him; and he said to Yudhishthira, "Keep dharma always in mind when you govern the kingdom. Reward those of your subjects who deserve to be rewarded. Don't allow any skills to decay. Consider deeply the problems of war—and the problems of peace. But what need I add to the advice already given you by Bhishma, Krishna, and Vidura?"

Next morning Dhritarashtra sent Vidura to Yudhishthira's palace. "King Dhritarashtra has performed the preliminary rites before retirement to the woods," he said. "He will leave the city on the first full moon night of October. But he wants some wealth from you because he wishes to perform the final funeral ceremony of Bhishma, Drona, and his hundred sons; if you allow it, he wishes to perform the same ceremony for the wicked Jayadratha."

The message pleased Yudhishthira and Arjuna, but Bhima did not hide his anger. "He's retiring to the woods," Arjuna whispered to Bhima, "don't be a fool!"

But Bhima said angrily, "Why should we give him wealth for his funeral ceremony? Weren't his sons responsible for our twelve-year exile? Did Dhritarashtra lift a finger to stop them then?"

Yudhishthira cut him short and ordered him to keep silent.

"You are my elder brother, Bhima, and I will not say anything more because it is my duty to respect you," said Arjuna.

Yudhishthira turned to Vidura and said, "Tell the noble Dhritarashtra that as much wealth as he needs for the final obsequies will be supplied. And Bhima will agree, whether he likes it or not."

Bhima cast angry glances around him but did not speak.

When the time of retirement came, Dhritarashtra summoned the Pandavas to his palace, and advised them further.

The citizens thronged terraces and streets in order to watch the departure. Kunti insisted on accompanying the old blind monarch and Gandhari into voluntary exile in the forest, but Yudhishthira held her back, and said, "Not you. I will go. Return to the city, and look after your daughters-in-law." But Kunti, crying and without answering him, ran after the old couple, and caught hold of Gandhari's hand.

"I will live with you in the forest. I will smear my body with dust and engage in penance, serving my father-in-law and mother-in-law," she said.

Deeply hurt, Yudhishthira was silent for a while; then he said to his mother, "This is a strange decision, mother. Don't do it. I cannot give you permission. How can you leave us, the kingdom, and your daughter-in-law alone? Think again, mother."

She heard; there were tears in her eyes; but she continued to follow Gandhari.

Bhima pleaded, "Please, mother, think of the royal duties to be done in the city! Why did you bring us up at all if you must leave us when we need you most? Look, the twins are beside themselves with sorrow. Listen to the words of Yudhishthira."

She looked at her children, but kept walking. Controlling her tears, she said, "When you lost your kingdom, I tried to prevent you from losing heart also, by inspiring you with courage and fortitude. I put courage in you then because I wanted you to come out unbroken from your exile. I put courage in Bhima because I wanted him not to lose faith in his strength of ten thousand elephants. I put courage in Nakula and Sahadeva to prevent them from dying of thirst and hunger. I did all this because I wanted Draupadi not to accept her insult in the gambling hall. You remember, Bhima, how Duhshasana dragged her, while in her period, like a plantain tree, when she had been won, as if she was no better than a slave. I gave you courage, my sons, because I did not want to see the race of Pandu die. Now, leave me alone. Let me follow my dharma. Be noble."

Ashamed, the Pandavas stopped. The others returned to the city, but Yudhishthira, Vidura and Sanjaya followed them to the forest. Vidura and Sanjaya spread *kusha* grass on the ground as a bed for Dhritarashtra; beside it, they made another for Gandhari. Kunti lay down happily next to Gandhari.

In this way, Dhritarashtra and his followers dedicated themselves to the pursuit of merit by penance. Gandhari and Kunti dressed in tree-bark and deer-skin. Controlling thought, word, and deed, they continued their meditations, until Dhritarashtra was reduced, like a great ascetic, to mere skin and bones. Vidura and Sanjaya, with singleminded devotion, performed exactly the same penance as the blind monarch.

Meanwhile, great sorrow prevailed in the capital, afflicting the Pandavas as well as the citizens. Unable to endure the pain of separation, Yudhishthira ordered a large procession of soldiers and citizens to proceed to the forest. Yudhishthira and his brothers sat around Dhritarashtra.

"Are you happy, Yudhishthira? Are the citizens happy and prosperous? Is there peace in the kingdom?" asked Dhritarashtra. "Accept from me these gifts of water, fruits, and roots. It is said that what a host eats himself, he should offer to his guests."

Yudhishthira ate the fruits and roots, and drank the water. Then the brothers made their beds under the tree, and passed the night in peaceful sleep.

In the morning they met Vyasa who said, "I see there is still sorrow in your hearts. Come with me to the river Bhagirathi, where I shall dispel your grief. I will give you a vision of the dead warriors."

The entire company moved toward the Bhagirathi; a surging sea of people, they camped on the banks. That day passed like a whole year, while they waited for the night to bring them a vision of the dead heroes. The sun sank in the sacred western waters, as, bathing in the Bhagirathi, they finished their evening devotions.

When night came, they went to Vyasa.
Dhritarashtra sat with the Pandavas and Brahmins,
The ladies sat in a group, with Gandhari.
The citizens lined up in priority of age.
Then Vyasa summoned the dead heroes.
There was a roar heard from the waters,
A noise of the clash of opposed armies.
Led by Bhishma and Drona, they rose,
Thousands of dead kings rose from the Bhagirathi.
Virata, and Draupadi, and the sons of Draupadi,
The son of Subhadra, the rakshasa Ghatotkacha,
Karna, Duryodhana, and Shakuni,
The sons of Dhritarashtra, headed by Duhshasana,
Lakshmana, the son of Duryodhana,
Bhagadatta, Shalya, and all the other heroes,
Too many to be named one by one.
They rose shining from the waters,
Clothed in divine dresses and glittering earrings,
Freed from hate, pride, anger, and jealousy.
Around them stood apsaras, nymphs of heaven.
Dhritarashtra saw them all with special vision,

Gandhari saw her hundred sons.
They rejoiced.
But the others stood spellbound,
Their hair standing on end, gazing
At the petrified procession of dead heroes.
Cleansed of hate and jealousy,
Son met father and mother, wife met husband,
Friend greeted friend.
The Pandavas met Karna,
And embraced him.
A scene of reconciliation:
No grief, no fear, no suspicion, no reproach,
Nothing but the meeting of loving minds.
The night passed in this manner.
Then it was over:
They all vanished suddenly, dismissed by Vyasa;
Chariots and warriors plunged in the sacred Bhagirathi.

The Pandavas returned to Hastinapura, and two more years passed. One day the sage of heaven, Narada, came to the capital, and was respectfully received by Yudhishthira.

"I see you after such a long time," said Yudhishthira. "What may I do for you, O learned Brahmin? Tell us the story of your travels."

"I have been to many holy rivers," replied Narada. "I am coming from the Bhagirathi."

"Did you see Dhritarashtra? How are Gandhari, Kunti, and Sanjaya? I have news that they are still engaged in the practice of strict penance."

"Listen carefully and calmly while I tell you what I have seen and heard," replied Narada. "When you left, Dhritarashtra began the severest self-mortification. He put pebbles in his mouth, and lived only on air; he would not speak a word to anyone. In six months' time he became a bundle of bones. Gandhari lived on water, but Kunti took food at monthly intervals. Sanjaya ate sparingly every sixth day. Dhritarashtra began to wander aimlessly in the forest. The two queens and Sanjaya followed him, and Sanjaya guided him whenever he got the chance. One day he came to a spot near the Ganga and, finishing his bath in the sacred river, he rose to return to his ashrama. But a fierce forest fire broke out: it spread fast, burning trees and animals. Snakes and boars fled to the safety of the marshes. The king, weak and tired, unable to run because of his severe fasting, said to Sanjaya, 'Go, Sanjaya, save yourself. We will perish in this fire and go to heaven.' The two queens were also too emanciated to attempt to escape from the fire. But Sanjaya said, 'This is not a sacred fire. I will not go.' 'Go!' repeated Dhritarashtra. 'Water, fire, wind, and fasting are good for ascetics.' He turned his face to the east, and sat down, with Gandhari and Kunti, to concentrate his mental energies. Sanjaya walked round him, and said, 'May you succeed in your yoga.' Controlling all their energies, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, and Kunti sat as still as wooden pillars. They perished in the fire. Sanjaya escaped. I met him near the Ganga in the company of some ascetics. He bid them farewell and went off to the region of the Himalayas. Later, I saw the burnt bodies of the King and the two queens. Do not grieve, Yudhishthira: they died happy, as they wanted to die."

From the inner apartments of the palace came the sound of loud lamentation.

The Sixteenth Book: The Battle With Clubs

In the thirtysixth year after the battle, many disturbing omens were seen by Yudhishthira. Dry, dusty storms blew into the city; birds wheeled backward; rivers flowed in reverse; a great fog always obscured the horizon; meteors crashed on the earth, scattering showers of flaming debris; darkness shrouded the sun; headless human bodies wandered at sunrise; brick-red nimbuses daily ringed the sun and moon.

One day during that year, the Yadavas, heroes of Krishna's clan, saw Vishvamitra, Kanva, and Narada enter the city of Dvaraka. They disguised Shamba as a woman, and said to the three sages, "This lady, the wife of the illustrious Vabhra, wants a son. What kind of son will she have?"

The sages, undeceived, replied, "Shamba will bring forth an iron club for the destruction of the Yadavas. Wicked and foolish men, pride has turned your heads—you will destroy your own race. Only Krishna and his elder brother Balarama will escape death at your hands. Balarama will enter the ocean, and a hunter named Jara will kill Krishna."

The sages went to Krishna's palace and informed him of the coming doom. Krishna summoned the Yadavas and repeated the prophecy; then he retired to his room.

Next day, Shamba brought forth an ugly iron club, looking like a giant harbinger of death. The Yadava king Ugrasena ordered the club to be ground into a fine powder, and the powder scattered on the sea. A royal proclamation was issued forbidding the manufacture and sale of intoxicating wines and liquors under penalty of impalement at the stake.

But fatal Time, bald-headed, bronze-skinned, stalked the streets; his fierce eyes peered inside every house. Rats and mice infested the streets; during the night they nibbled at the hair and nails of the sleeping inhabitants. Earthen pots cracked without cause; mynas chattered maddeningly day and night inside the houses; goats howled like jackals; asses were born to cows, elephants to mules, cats to bitches, and mice to mongooses.

The Yadavas behaved shamelessly. Brahmins, gods and ancestors were insulted everywhere; even gurus and elders were not spared. Wives and husbands indulged in constant adultery. Fires began to cast shadows on their left. Clean boiled food, brought fresh from the kitchen, festered suddenly with worms when served to guests. When Brahmins received gifts or blessed the time of day, or when ascetics sat down to meditate, the sudden pattering of innumerable invisible feet was heard. The lunar fortnight showed eccentric signs.

Noticing these omens, Krishna called the Yadavas and said, "Rahu makes the fourteenth day of the moon into the fifteenth again. This happened once before, when the Kauravas and Pandavas made plans to destroy themselves. The hour of our destruction has come." He said this, remembering the prophecy of Gandhari, and desirous of making her words come true. He ordered a mass pilgrimage of the Yadavas to the sea coast for the purpose of bathing in the sacred waters of the ocean.

At night the Yadava women dreamt of a black hag with white teeth, who laughed wildly and ran through the streets of Dvaraka, snapping the sacred threads on all the ladies' wrists. The men had nightmares in which vultures gorged on their flesh while they slept, rakshasas stole their ornaments, umbrellas, flags, and armour, and Krishna's iron discus flew away in the sky. In front of Krishna's charioteer, Daruka, the chariot was dragged by its four horses, who galloped away with it on the waters of the ocean.

Camping in Prabhasa, the Yadavas gave themselves up to feasting and merriment. Food cooked for the highest Brahmins was mixed with urine and fed to apes and monkeys. Then began the great drinking bout. The field resounded with the revels of actors and dancers performing to the accompaniment of trumpets. Balarama drank in Krishna's presence; so did others.

Flushed with wine, Satyaki, laughing, insulted Kritavarman in everyone's presence, saying, "What kind of Kshatriya is he who slaughters defenceless warriors in their sleep? Run off! We have nothing to do with you."

Kritavarman derisively pointed his left hand at Satyaki and retorted, "What about you, who killed Bhurishravas when he was engaged in meditation?"

Krishna glanced angrily at Kritavarman.

Satyaki said, "Today I will kill you even as you killed the sleeping sons of Draupadi with the help of Ashvatthaman."

Satyaki rushed at Kritavarman, and with a single blow severed his head from his body; then, sword in hand, he ran amok, hitting right and left, till Krishna restrained his frenzy.

But the Bhojas and Andhakas rose against the single Satyaki: they struck him mercilessly with their wine pots. Krishna's son Pradyumna, by his wife Rukmini, rushed to defend Satyaki. But the mob beat both to death. Enraged, Krishna picked up a fistful of *eraka* grass; each blade changed into a dangerous iron club, as he hurled it at them with the impact of thunder. In the dreadful carnage that followed, son killed father, and father killed son.

Krishna stood apart, watching the scene, a deadly blade of grass in his hand.

Daruka said to Krishna, "Let us find Balarama. He is not here."

They discovered Balarama meditating, sitting on the ground, resting against a tree trunk in a secluded spot. "Go quickly to Arjuna," Krishna ordered Daruka, "and tell him the Yadavas have begun to destroy themselves." To Vabhru he said, "Go quickly and make arrangements for the protection of the women. See that robbers, tempted by their jewellery, don't waylay them."

Still drunk and despondent, Vabhru left, but the moment he took a few steps away from Krishna, an iron club leapt by itself on him and slew him.

"Wait for me here," Krishna said to Balarama, "while I go and arrange for the safety of the ladies."

To his father Vasudeva in Dvaraka he said, "Look after the women until Arjuna arrives. I must go to Balarama who is waiting for me near the forest." He touched his father's feet with his head, and rose to leave.

A loud wail rose from the women and children.

Krishna consoled them, saying, "Wait for Arjuna. He is coming. He will help you."

When he returned, he saw Balarama rapt in yoga and an enormous snake issuing slowly from his mouth. It had red eyes, a thousand heads, it was mountainous, and as it emerged it began crawling toward the ocean. The ocean rose to receive and honour him; and Balarama departed in this manner from the mortal world.

Krishna wandered in the forest for some time, lost in thought. Recalling Gandhari's curse, he immersed himself in yoga. Recalling that the sage Durvasas had made all parts of his body invulnerable except his feet, he sat down to meditate. A hunter named Jara passed by that way and, mistaking Krishna for a deer, shot an arrow which pierced Krishna's heel. When Jara approached, he ted it, but he allowed it to happen. So you see there is no reason for you to grieve. Behind everything, Arjuna, is the hand of Time. Kala is the seed of the universe. Kala gives and Kala takes away. Kala inspires, and Kala frustrates. Today you are a master and rule others, tomorrow you are a servant and are ruled. Today you are weaponless, impotent; tomorrow you may not be. But your time has come—you must now seek the highest goal."

Arjuna returned to Hastinapura, and informed Yudhishthira of all that had taken place

The Seventeenth Book:
The Ascent

After hearing the details of the ruin of the Vrishnis, Yudhishthira decided to renounce the world.

He said to Arjuna, "You are wise, you know Time cooks us all. We are all trussed-up victims of Time."

Arjuna kept repeating, "Time, Time, Kala, Kala." He agreed with Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira handed over the kingdom to Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra by a low-caste maid.

He placed Parikshit also on the throne and, in great sorrow, said to Subhadra: "Parikshit, son of your son, will be the king of the Kuru race. He will rule in his capital Hastinapura. Look after him. See that he does nothing contrary to dharma."

To please and honour Krishna, Yudhishthira gifted jewellery, clothes, villages, horses, chariots, and female attendants in hundreds and thousands to deserving Brahmins.

He summoned his citizens and announced his decision to renounce the world. Yudhishthira, son of Dharma, King of the Kurus. took off his royal ornaments and put on a dress of tree-bark. Bhima, Arjuna, the twins, and shining Draupadi did the same.

They looked exactly as they did in the past when the six, after the defeat in the dice game, left the capital and went into exile. This time, they looked happy.

Ulupi, daughter of the Naga chief and wife of Arjuna, dived back into the waters of the Ganga. Arjuna's other wife Chitrangada returned to Manipura. The elderly ladies of the Kuru race formed a circle round their grandson Parikshit.

Firm in yoga, determined on renunciation, the Pandava mahatmas travelled through many countries and crossed many seas and rivers.

Yudhishthira led the party. Behind him, Bhima; then Arjuna; then the twins in order of birth; and finally, Draupadi, the dark-skinned lady of loveliness with eyes like lotus petals.

Trailing them was a dog.

They came to the sea of red water. Arjuna flung his Gandiva bow and two inexhaustible quivers in the waves.

The Pandavas then turned south. When they reached the northern coast of the salt sea, they moved to the south-west and, a little later, directly westwards until they came to the city of Dvaraka flooded under ocean water.

From here, they turned north, and proceeded steadily in that direction.

They came to the tall mountain Himavat and, crossing it, found themselves facing a massive sandy plateau. They saw, in the distance, the tallest peak of all, the top of the huge mountain called Meru.

Inspired by the intensity of their yoga, they climbed Meru. But Draupadi's yoga failed her, and she collapsed on the slope.

Mighty Bhima asked truthful Yudhishthira, "She never did anything wrong. Why has she fallen?"

"We all loved her equally," replied Yudhishthira, "but she favoured Arjuna. Today she pays the price for her partiality."

Yudhishthira continued to climb, with full concentration.

Then Sahadeva collapsed.

Bhima asked Yudhishthira, "He was always humble and never failed to serve us. Why has he fallen?"

Yudhishthira replied, "He believed that no one equalled him in wisdom. Today he pays for that mistake."

Leaving Sahadeva behind, Yudhishthira kept climbing, followed by his brothers and the dog.

Next brave Nakula, who loved his kinsmen greatly and who had witnessed Draupadi and Sahadeva fall, himself collapsed.

Seeing handsome and heroic Nakula fall, Bhima said to Yudhishthira, "Our handsome brother Nakula was perfect in dharma, and obeyed us always."

"He was intelligent," replied Yudhishthira, "and he had dharma. But he thought none in the world was as handsome as he. That is why he has fallen today. A man must accept his destiny."

Arjuna saw Nakula and the others fall, and was deeply pained.

Then it was the turn of Arjuna, white-horse-rider and foe-slayer, to collapse.

When Arjuna, who had the energy of Indra, fell and almost breathed his last, Bhima said to Yudhishthira, "This mahatma never spoke a lie. As far as I can remember, he did not lie even in jest. What wrong has he done to be stricken thus?"

Yudhishthira replied, "Arjuna promised to destroy all his enemies in one day. He was a proud hero, but he failed to keep his word. So he falls today. He had nothing but contempt for other archers. That is not the way to prosper in life."

Yudhishthira kept climbing.

Then Bhima collapsed.

He fell, and shouted, "Look! I whom you loved dearly, have fallen. Why?"

Yudhishthira replied, "You were a great boaster and a great eater. It never occurred to you to think of the needs of others when you ate. That is why you have fallen."

Yudhishthira kept climbing. He did not look back. The only one following him now was the dog.

A tremendous noise suddenly shook sky and earth, and Indra descended in a chariot into which he invited Yudhishthira to enter.

Yudhishthira said to the thousand-eyed god, "My brothers have all collapsed on the way. Where I go, they must come too. I do not want heaven without them. Our gentle wife also should accompany us. Grant me this request."

Indra replied, "You will meet your brothers in heaven. They have arrived there ahead of you. They are all there, including Draupadi. Do not worry, Yudhishthira. They heve left their bodies on earth. You, however, must go bodily to heaven. It is so ordained."

"Lord of past and present," said Yudhishthira, "you see this dog who has faithfully followed me. I have begun to love him. Let him come with me."

Indra said, "Today you have been granted immortality, infinite prosperity, absolute success, and divine delight. Forget the dog. No wrong will be done if you do."

Yudhishthira said, "Thousand-eyed one, right-acting one, it is hard for a good man to do a deed that violates goodness. I do not want a reward, no matter how wonderful, that requires me to abandon someone who is devoted to me."

Indra replied, "Heaven has no arrangement for people with dogs. Think it over, good Yudhishthira. My suggestion is, forget the dog. No wrong will be done if you do."

Yudhishthira said, "To abandon anyone who is devoted is immoral. It is as immoral as killing a Brahmin. Great Indra, I will not abandon this dog even if it means losing heavenly happiness. I am firm in my vow—I will not abandon a person who is in great fear, nor one who is devoted to me, nor one who is suffering, nor one who is too weak to protect himself, nor one who begs for his life. I will die before I abandon such a person."

"What's a dog?" said Indra. "The presence of dog pollutes gifts and libations offered in the sacred fire. Forget this dog. Forget him and achieve the state of the gods. After all, you abandoned your brothers and Draupadi. Your good karma has earned you the delights of heaven. Why are you so confused? You have renounced everything. What prevents you from renouncing this dog?"

Yudhishthira said, "The three worlds know that one can neither make friends with the dead nor have enmity with the dead. My brothers and Draupadi died. It was not in my power to bring them back to life. So I left them behind. But I did not forsake them while they were living. To forsake any faithful creature is like harming a person who has sought your protection, or like killing a woman, or stealing from a Brahmin, or wishing ill of a friend."

No sooner had Yudhishthira finished speaking than the dog transformed himself into the god of Dharma. Pleased, Dharma praised Yudhishthira with these sweet words:

"You are noble and intelligent, and as moral in your behaviour as Pandu was. You have compassion for all living creatures, Yudhishthira, and you have shown it in action. Once before I tested you, in the forest of Dvaita, where your brave brothers were put under a spell by Death. On that occasion, you desired the life of Nakula because that was the way to ensure the welfare of your stepmother Madri. No one in heaven can equal you; the world of infinite happiness is now yours. Your goals were always high and unselfish and pure. You have deserved the reward that is richly yours."

Placing Yudhishthira in a chariot, Dharma, Indra, the gods and divine *rishis* ascended heavenwards. The sky shone with their combined radiance.

Eloquent Narada, the *rishi* of heaven, said: "The glory of Yudhishthira's achievements excels the glory of all the royal *rishis*. His fame and goodness have granted him the unique privilege of ascending bodily to heaven."

Yudhishthira paid homage to the gods and royal *rishis* and said: "Wherever my brothers are, there I will go. It may be a place of happiness, or it may be a place of sorrow. I have no desire to go any place else, no matter how special."

Indra listened to Yudhishthira, and said: "Live here, Yudhishthira. Your good karma has earned you this special place. The success you have achieved is not likely to be achieved by anyone else. Why are you still affected by human feelings? Your brothers have attained the world of heaven. You are still bound by human feelings. Look, here is heaven—you can join the divine *rishis* and perfected mortals who have achieved a place in the realm of the gods."

Intelligent Yudhishthira replied to the king of the gods: "I will not be separated from them; I will go where my brothers are; I will go where the excellent, dark-complexioned, lovely-figured, intelligent and moral Draupadi is."

The Eighteenth Book:
Heaven

The first spectacle that Yudhishthira saw when he entered heaven was Duryodhana gloriously ensconced in a beautiful seat, and radiating a heroic sun-like splendour.

A fit of anger overcame Yudhishthira. He turned away his face, and said loudly: "I have no desire to share heaven with greedy and short-sighted Duryodhana. He persecuted us and sent us into exile in the forest; he provoked us to kill so many of our friends and relatives in the great war; he ordered our lovely wife Draupadi to be dragged before her elders in the assembly hall. Listen to me, gods! I do not wish even to see his face! I want to go where my brothers are."

Narada smiled, and said: "There are no enmities in heaven, your majesty. Take back all that you said about Duryodhana. Listen to me. Raja Duryodhana is respected as a god by his followers who are also now in heaven. He offered his body as a sacrifice in the fire of battle, and he has attained the reward that is reserved for the finest heroes. True, he persecuted you and your brothers on earth. But his adherence to the Kshatriya code has brought him to heaven. The most terrifying situation never terrified him. Child, forget the humiliation of the dice game. Forget the insult to Draupadi. Forget the horrors and meanness of the great war. You are in heaven now: meet Duryodhana with dignity and courtesy. No hatred here, no bitterness."

Yudhishthira said: "If heaven is the place for the immoral friend-killer and world-destroyer Duryodhana, who laid waste the earth with all her horses and elephants and humans, who infuriated us into taking revenge, then show me the place where my mahatma brothers are, who were always truthful and brave and strict-vowed. Where is Dhrishtadyumna—and Satyaki? Where are the sons of Dhrishtadyumna and the other Kshatriya chiefs who followed the Kshatriya code in every detail? Narada, show me Virata, Drupada, Shikhandin, the sons of Draupadi, and resolute Abhimanyu. I do not see them here. Where is Karna, and where is Arjuna? Where is Draupadi? Take me away from here. This is not heaven. Heaven is where my brothers are."

"Child," said the gods, "if you wish to go there, then let us hurry."

They turned to the divine guide, saying, "Take Yudhishthira to his friends and relatives."

The divine guide led the way. Yudhishthira followed. The path was rough and difficult and filthy. A heavy darkness obscured it.

Instead of grass, hair.
Stinking with stench, marrow-miry, blood-bespattered.
Flies, bees, hornets, bears.
Festering corpses.
Bones filled with worm-pus.
Ringed with fire.
Crows and iron-beaked vultures.
Needle-mouthed blood-sucking spirits.
Huge hills, high as the Vindhya range.
Legless and armless corpses.
Guts strewn all over.
But Yudhishthira, man of dharma, persevered.
A river of scalding water.
A razor-leafed forest.
A desert of white-hot sand.
Rocks and stones of steel.
Iron cauldrons with boiling oil.

Yudhishthira turned to the divine guide and asked: "How long is this path? Where are my brothers? Is this also a part of heaven?"

The divine guide stopped. "This is the end. I was ordered by the gods to stop here. If you are tired, your majesty, we can return."

The stench was overpowering.

Yudhishthira, bewildered and lost, decided to return.

A pitiful wail rose around him. A multitudinous lament.

"Son of Dharma, royal *rishi*, son of Pandu! Be gracious to us! Stay here! When you came, a soft breeze began blowing. You came like a breath of sweet fragrance. You brought us infinite relief. We saw you, and we became happy. Son of Kunti, stay a few moments more, let us remain happy a few more moments. As long as you are here, we feel no pain."

Compassion stirred in Yudhishthira's heart and he said loudly, "O how pitiful!"

He stood there, unmoving. He vaguely recalled the sad, lost, wailing voices, but he could not place them exactly.

Puzzled, Dharma's son Yudhishthira asked: "Who are you? Why are you here?"

The voices spoke up, in a circular, all-surrounding lament.

"I am Karna!"

"I am Bhima!"

"I am Arjuna!"

"I am Nakula!"

"I am Sahadeva!"

"I am Dhritarashtra!"

"I am Draupadi!"

"We are Draupadi's sons!"

Yudhishthira heard the anguished voices, and thought: *What a terrible karma*! He said to himself: "What immoral deeds must Karna and Draupadi's sons have committed to be consigned to this foul-smelling region? I did not think they did any great wrong, ever. What noble deed did Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana do to enable him and even his followers to attain such a glorious place? He shines like Indra himself, and he is worshipped like Indra. And how did these get only hell? All were heroes, all were truthful, all practised dharma and studied the Vedas, all performed sacrifices, all gave gifts to Brahmins, all abided by the rules of Kshatriya honour. Am I asleep, am I awake? Am I in my senses? Am I hallucinating? What has happened?"

Tortured with indecision, anxiety, and grief, Yudhishthira asked himself these questions.

Then he could not control himself, and burst into a tirade against the gods, condemning even Dharma.

The stench made his head reel. He said to the guide: "Go! Return to those who sent you. Tell them I will stay here because my presence here gives comfort to my brothers."

The divine guide returned to Indra and reported all that Yudhishthira had done and said.

In an instant Indra, followed by the gods, appeared before Yudhishthira. So did the god of Dharma. The lustrous bodies of the assembly of so many gods dispelled the darkness. The cauldrons and iron rocks vanished. The torments ceased. The horrendous corpses disappeared. A soft, scented, cool, pure breeze began blowing.

All the gods were present: the Maruts with Indra, the Vasus with the twin Ashvins, the Sadhyas, Rudras, Adityas, the perfected mortals and the great *rishis*. Radiant Indra comforted Yudhishthira.

"Come to us, Yudhishthira," he said, "the illusion is over. You have triumphed. Do not be angry. Listen to me. Child, every king gets a glimpse of hell. Life is an ambivalent mixture of good and bad. The man who first tastes the fruits of his good karma must next taste hell. The man who first tastes hell must later experience heaven. The man whose bad deeds exceed his good, enjoys heaven first. So, for your welfare, I sent you here first for the experience of hell. Now you will taste the fruits of your good and noble deeds, and live in the regions you have earned by the strength of your penance and charity. Gods and gandharvas and apsaras, dressed in white robes, will serve you and make you happy. Here flows the Ganga of heaven. Bathe in it, and you lose your human nature. You will feel no grief, no enmity; you will be free from disease."

The god Dharma said to his son Yudhishthira: "You have pleased me with your truth-speaking, forgiveness, and self-discipline. For this is the third time that I have tested you. Now I know that you are morally incorruptible. Remember how in the Dvaita forest you came to the lake to recover the two lost fire-sticks. You passed the first test well. Then I assumed the form of a dog, and tested you a second time when your brothers and Draupadi collapsed on the slope of Meru. Then the third test—and this time you, for the sake of your brothers, preferred hell to heaven. You are now purified, you are now blessed. Son of Kunti, your brothers do not deserve hell. It was all an illusion devised by Indra."

Honoured by the gods, Maruts and *rishis*, Yudhishthira went to the place where the heroes of the Kuru race enjoyed heavenly bliss.

He saw Krishna in the form of Brahma, worshipped by Arjuna who blazed with radiance; they were adored in turn by the gods. Seeing Yudhishthira, they welcomed him.

Elsewhere he saw Karna, dazzling with the glory of a dozen suns. He saw refulgent Bhima, sitting among the Maruts, next to the wind god. In the place of the Ashvins, Yudhishthira saw radiant Nakula and Sahadeva.

He saw Draupadi wearing a lotus garland, dazzling with the splendour of the sun. He had a sudden urge to speak to her.

Indra, the lord of the gods, said to him: "She is Lakshmi herself. She became Draupadi, the fragrant and heart-delighting daughter of Draupada, for your welfare. She was not conceived in a mother's womb, but created by Shiva, who desired your pleasure and welfare. These five glorious gandharvas who shine with the radiance of fire are Draupadi's five sons. And here is the son of Subhadra, enjoying the company of Soma: the powerful Abhimanyu, now soft and pleasant like moonlight. Here is the great Pandu, in the company of Kunti and Madri. Over there is Bhishma, Shantanu's son, surrounded by the Vasus. Sitting next to Brihaspati is your guru Drona. They have all left their mortal bodies behind, and they are enjoying the celestial state which they have earned through the goodness of their thought, word, and deed."

The theme of this epic is the history of India. It traces the history of the Bharata race, so it is called the Bharata. It does so with moral seriousness, so it is called the Mahabharata.

The intelligent interpreter of this great epic
Is cleansed of all impurities,
He enjoys Dharma, Artha, Kama,
And attains the ultimate Moksha.
What is found in this epic
  may be elsewhere;
What is not in this epic
  is nowhere else.
This is the Epic of Victory.
It should be heard by the salvation-seeker.
Brahmins and kings should read it;
So should pregnant women.
The seeker of heaven will get heaven;
The seeker of victory finds victory;
The pregnant woman gets a son
  or a fortune-favoured daughter.
Powerful, born-on-an-island Vyasa,
  who will not return,
Condensed the Mahabharata

for the sake of Dharma.
Narada recited the epic to the gods,
Asita-Devala to the spirits of the ancestors,
Shuka to the rakshasas and yakshas,
And Vaishampayana to human beings.
This is a sacred history.
As profound and holy as the Vedas.
The man who recites or listens to this epic,
If he does so devotedly, is purified.

Thousands of mothers and fathers,
Hundreds of sons and wives,
Come into this world, and leave this world.
Thousands of others will come
  and depart.
Thousands of occasions for joy,
Thousands of occasions for sadness—
The ignorant are their victims,
The wise remain unmoved.

I raise my arms and I shout—
  but no one listens!
From dharma comes success and pleasure:
  why is dharma not practised?
Never reject dharma—not for pleasure, not from fear,
  not out of greed.
Dharma is eternal. Discard life itself,
  but not dharma.
Pleasure and pain are not eternal.
  The soul alone is eternal.

This is the story of the epic. Anyone who listens to it in its entirety is cleansed of all impurities. His defects are dispelled, as darkness is dispelled by the sun, and he enjoys the celestial experience of the realm of Vishnu as Vishnu does himself.

The Mahabharata is an encyclopaedia of Hindu life and culture. With one very important difference—its learning is communicated in a painless, in fact positively pleasurable way, because whatever it wishes to say is told in the form of story, legend, and myth.

The main story—the hard core of this timeless doomsday epic rich .in dharma—is the rivalry which leads to a struggle for power between the cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, both' descendants of Kuru, culminating inevitably in the war of Kurukshetra, a terrifying holocaust which ends in a pyrrhic victory for the Pandavas.

What the epic really does is to provide a vivid, complete entry into the variety, complexity, and intensity of life. "What is found in this epic may be found elsewhere; what is not in this epic is nowhere else." It is not a Hindu epic; it is the epic of India that is Bharat; it is a world epic. In this new, condensed transcreation, P. Lal makes the essential *Mahabharata* available to the interested reader seeking an experience of life's magnificent totality.

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Glossary

The diacritical marks used here follow the international roman transliteration system, with four exceptions : *ś* is represented as *śh*, *ṣ* as *ṣh*, *c* as *ch*, and *ṛ* as *ṛi*.

ABHIMANYU (Self-willed): Arjuna's son by Subhadrā. On the second day of the war he killed Duryodhana's son Lakṣhmaṇa; he was surrounded and killed by the Kauravas on the thirteenth day. He married Uttarā, daughter of King Virāṭa; their son, Parīkṣhit, became king of Hastināpura when the Pāṇḍavas went on their last pilgrimage.

ĀCHĀRYA (Former of character): Title of Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas.

ADHARMA (Against moral law) : Since Hinduism has no word for sin or evil ("pāpa" suggests crime; misdeed, ill behaviour), adharma serves as a blanket term for any form of unrighteousness or violation of the moral law.

ADHIRATHA (Supreme chariot): The foster-father of Karṇa.

ADHYĀTMAN (Supreme Ātman): The spirit of the universe, the "Over-soul."

ĀDITYAS: Sons of Aditi, goddess of eternal space; they are twelve in number.

AGNI (Fire) : The fire god in the Vedas. One of the three major Vedic deities (Vāyu or Indra, and Sūrya are the other two).

AJĀTAŚHATRU (One whose enemy is unborn): Another name for Yudhiṣhṭhira.

AMARĀVATI (Immortality abode) : Indra's heavenly capital, located, according to legend, near Meru, the mountain of heaven. Also known as Devapura, "city of the gods."

AMBĀ (Mother) : Eldest daughter of king of Kāśhi (Vārāṇasi). Bhīṣhma abducted her and her sisters Ambikā and Ambālikā for marriage with Vichitravīrya. She was betrothed to the king of Śhālva, who refused to marry her when she persuaded Bhīṣhma to send her back, because he doubted her purity. She propitiated Śhiva, who granted her the boon of being re-born as Shikhaṇḍin (the warrior who, with Arjuna, killed Bhīṣhma) in the palace of king Drupada.

AMBĀLIKĀ : The younger widow of Vichitravīrya, and mother of Pāṇḍu by Vyāsa, compiler of the *Mahābhārata* (See *AMBĀ*).

AṄGA: Probably the precincts of Bhāgalpur in Bengal; its capital was Champā.

APSARĀ (Moving in the water) : Nymph of Indra's heaven; celebrated apsarās are Urvaśhī, Menakā, and Rambhā. "They are the wives or the mistresses of the Gandharvas, and are not prudish in the dispensation of their favours."

ĀRAṆYAKA : Another name for the Vana Parva ("Forest Book"), the third book of the Mahābhārata, dealing with the life of the Pāṇḍavas in exile.

ARJUNA : The third Pāṇḍava brother. His divine father was Indra.

ARTHA : Material success.

ĀRYA (Loyal, noble, dependable): Name of invading and settling race in

North India, *circa* 2000 B. C. The original Drāviḍian inhabitants (probably water-worshippers and devotees of Śhiva) were disrespectfully termed An-Ārya by the fire-worshipping Āryans. Hinduism is a complex blend of Āryan and Drāviḍian elements.

ASURAS (Anti-gods): Enemies of the gods, including the Daityas and Dānavas; they are descendants of Kaśhyapa. Their counter-force helps sustain the creative tension of the universe.

AŚHVAMEDHA (Horse sacrifice): Elaborate ritual involving the sacrifice of a horse to indicate total and undisputed sovereignty over a kingdom.

ĀTMAN : The individual soul or self; as distinct from Brahman, the supreme self.

AVATĀRA (Descent): An incarnation of a god. Viṣhṇu, the Preserving Aspect of the Hindu trinity (Brahmā-Viṣhṇu-Śhiva), has had nine avataras so far: (1) Matsya (Fish), (2) Kūrma (Tortoise), (3) Varāha (Boar), (4) Narasiṁha (Man-Lion), (5) Vāmana (Dwarf), (6) Paraśhu-Rāma (Axe-armed Rāma), (7) Rāma, (8) Kriṣhṇa (Dark-skinned One), (9) Buddha. The tenth, Kalki (The White Horse), is predicted to appear at the end of the Kali Yuga. The order of appearance of the avatāras suggests an evolutionary development.

BALARĀMA (Strong Rāma): Kṛiṣhṇa's elder brother; he is also called Madhupriya (Wine-Lover).

BARBARAS : Non-Hindus; Compare Greek *barbaros* (foreigners, specially Persians). "The analogy to 'barbarians' is not in sound only, but in all authorities these are classed with borderers and foreigners and nations not Hindu."

BHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA (Ancient divine history): A religious book with twelve divisions and a total of 18,000 śhlokas; the tenth division details the history of Kṛiṣhṇa.

BHĀGĪRATHĪ : The river Gaṅgā. Moved by austerities of Bhagīratha, Śhiva allowed the descent of the Gaṅgā on the earth in order to purify the ashes of Bhagīratha's ancestors.

BHARATA : Son of Duṣhyanta (of the Puru dynasty) and Śhakuntala. Ninth in descent from him was Kuru and fourteenth from Kuru was Śhāntanu (see *The Mahābhārata Family Tree* at end-papers of this volume).

BHĪMA (Fearsome): Second of the Pāṇḍava brothers; according to myth, he is the son of the wind god Vāyu, whose other son is the monkey chief Hanumān.

BHĪṢHMA (Terrible): Son of Śhāntanu by the river goddess Gaṅgā; guru in martial arts of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. Also called Nadi-jā (River-Born) and Tāla-Ketu (Palm-Bannered).

BRAHMAN: The uncreated, undying universal soul; the attributeless (nirguṇa), ultimate divinity. Identical with Ātman to the realised person, different to the ignorant.

BRAHMĀ: First person singular of Brahman; God the active creator, born from the primal Cosmic Egg. His creation lasts one Brahmā day or 2,160,000,000 years; and is then dissolved, and re-created. He is red-skinned, and has five heads (but is shown often with four, one having been burnt to ashes by Śhiva, whom he had insulted). In his four hands he holds a sceptre, a spoon, a string of beads (or a bow), and the Vedas. His consort is the goddess of learning, Lakṣhmī; his vehicle the swan. Also called Chaturmukha (Four-Faced), Haṁsa-Vāhana (Swan-Rider), and Prajāpati (Lord of Creatures).

BRAHMACHARYA: Self-control, often in the sense of abstinence from sex. A *brahmachāri* is one who has renounced sense pleasures.

BRAHMIN: The priestly caste. Only Brahmins can be Hindu priests. Manu divides a Brahmin's life-span into four stages: (1) Brahmacharya (Behaving as Brahman): the celibate studentship under a guru; (2) Gṛihastha (House duty): married life as family head and performance of domestic rituals; (3) Vānaprastha (Life in the forest): retirement in the forest for penance and austerities; (4) Sannyāsa (Renunciation): the final stage of the detached religious mendicant on the road to mokṣha.

BṚIHANNALA (Long-armed): Name of Arjuna during his thirteenth year of exile, disguised as a eunuch in the court of Virāṭa.

BṚIHASPATI (Lord of Greatness): The family priest of the gods.

CHĀRVĀKA: A rākṣhasa friendly to Duryodhana; he publicly challenged Yudhiṣhṭhira's right to the throne of Hastināpura after the battle of Kurukṣhetra, and was killed by a mantra from the assembled Brahmins.

CHEKITĀNA: Son of Dhṛiṣhṭaketu; ally of the Pāṇḍavas.

CHITRĀṄGADA: Elder son of Śhāntanu; killed in an encounter with a gandharva king of the same name.

CHITRĀṆGADĀ: Daughter of king Chitravāhana; wife of Arjuna and mother of Vabhruvāhana.

CHITRASENA: (1) One of the hundred sons of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra; (2) a chief of the Yakṣhas.

DAITYAS: Descendants from Diti by the sage Kaśhyapa, these anti-gods (asuras) fought incessantly against the gods. "They and the Dānavas are generally associated, and are hardly distinguishable."

DAKṢHA: Ancient *ṛiṣhi* sometimes described as the son of Brahmā.

DAKṢHIṆĀ: Fee paid to a Brahmin who conducts a sacrifice or *yajña*; also fee paid to teacher as a tribute.

DAṆḌAKA: The forest between the rivers Godāvarī and Narmadā.

DARṢHANA (Vision by demonstration): Any of the six systems of Hindu philosophy: Nyāya, Vaiśheṣhika, Sāṁkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mimāṁsa, Uttara-Mimāṁsa.

DEVAKĪ: Wife of Vasudeva, and mother of Kṛiṣhṇa.

DEVĪ ("Goddess"): Daughter of Himavat (the Himālayas), and consort of Śhiva. She is Śhiva's shakti or female energy, and has a dual character, one gentle and beautiful, the other fierce and terrible. In her gentle form she is

Umā (Light), Pārvatī (Belonging to the mountain), and Gaurī (Yellow): in her fierce aspect she is Durgā (Inaccessible), Kālī (Time) and Shyāmā(Dark).

DHARMA (DHṚI=stable, steady): Code of good conduct, pattern of noble living, religious rules and observance. English has no equivalent for dharma; "religion" is a poor approximation.

DHARMA-RĀJA (King of good conduct): A patronym of Yudhiṣhṭhira. Yudhiṣhṭhira divine father is Dharma.

DHAUMYA: Family priest of the Pāṇḍavas.

DHṚIṢHṬADYUMNA: Brother of Draupadī. As leader of the Pāṇḍava armies, he killed Droṇa, who had beheaded his father Drupada; he was kicked to death in his tent by Aśhvatthāman, Droṇa's son, after the war had ended.

DHṚIṢHṬAKETU: (1) A son of Dhṛiṣhṭadyumna. (2) A son of Śhiśhupāla, and an ally of the Pāṇḍavas. (3) King of the Kekayas, and an ally of the Pāṇḍavas.

DHṚITARĀṢHṬRA (Stable-ruling): Brother of Pāṇḍu; blind ruler of Hastināpura. He was the eldest son of Vyāsa by Vichitravīrya's queen, Ambikā. He had a hundred sons by Gāndhārī. He and Gāndhārī perished in a forest fire after renouncing palace life a few years after the end of the Kurukṣhetra war.

DRAUPADĪ: The dark-skinned daughter of King Drupada of Pāñchāla, and wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers. She had five sons; by Yudhiṣhṭhira, Prativindhya; by Bhīma, Śhrutasoma; by Arjuna, Śhrutakīrti; by Nakula, Śhatanika; and by Sahadeva, Śhrutakarman. She is also called Kṛiṣhṇā (Dark-skinned), Yājñaseni (Sacrifice-born), because her father obtained her at the altar after the performance of a great sacrificial ritual, Pañchamī (Five-husbanded), and Nityauvanī (Ever-youthful).

DROṆA (Bucket): The Brahmin āchārya or teacher of the Kaurvas and Pāṇḍavas; so named because his father Bharadvāja generated him in a bucket. He was married to Kṛipa, Bhīṣhma's half-sister, and by her had a son, Aśhvatthāman.

DRUPADA: King of Pāñchāla, and father of Draupadī. He was Droṇa's schoolmate, but grievously offended Droṇa by letting his friend down when Droṇa was in need. Droṇa routed his armies, annexed the southern half of his kingdom, but spared his life. In revenge, Drupada had two Brahmins perform a ritualistic sacrifice, by which he obtained a son, Dhṛiṣhṭadyumna, and a daughter, Draupadī, from the sacrificial fire. He also had a younger son, Śhikhaṇḍin.

DUḤŚHALĀ: The only daughter of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra; wife of Jayadratha.

DUḤŚHĀSANA (Hard to rule): The second of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra's hundred sons. Bhīma ripped open his breast and drank his blood on the sixteenth day of the battle, because he had dragged Draupadī by her hair while she was in her period.

DURVĀSAS (Ill-dressed): An easily irritable sage, the son of Atri and Anasuyā.

DURYODHANA (Difficult to conquer): The eldest son of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra, by

Gāndhārī.

DUṢHYANTA: A king of the lunar—the Puru-dynasty. He married Śhakuntalā. The legend is dramatised in Kalidāsa's *Śhakuntalā*.

DVAIPĀYANA (Island-born): Another name of Vyāsa, so called because he was born to Satyavatī on an island, the out-of-wedlock son of the sage Parāśhara. He is also called Kānīna (Bastard).

EKACHAKRA (Single wheel): A city in the land of the Kīchakas, where the Pāṇḍavas passed the first years of their exile.

GAṆAPATI (Lord of people): A name of Ganeśha (q.v.), the elephant-headed god.

GĀNDHĀRĪ: Princess of Gāndhāra, the Gandaritis of Herodotus, a kingdom on the west bank of the Indus; and wife of the blind king Dhṛitarāṣhṭra. Because her husband was blind, she spent her life blindfolded.

GANDHARVA: Denizens of the sky or Indra's heaven, soma-drinking connoisseurs of women. The Atharva-Veda says there are 6333 Gandharvas, but different books give other figures. Very likely the name of a hill-tribe in north India.

GĀṆḌĪVA: Arjuna's bow, supposed to have been given by Soma to Varuṇa, who passed it on to Agni, who presented it to Arjuna.

GANEŚHA (Lord of people): The elephant-headed one-tusked deity in the Hindu pantheon, son of Shiva and Pārvatī. "He is the god of wisdom and the remover of obstacles." Many legends account for his elephant head. "Pārvatī went to her bath and told her son to keep the door. Śhiva wished to enter and was opposed, so he cut off Ganeśha's head. To pacify Pārvatī he replaced it with an elephant's, the first that came to hand." He is the scribe who takes down the *Mahābhārata* on Vyāsa's dictation. His skin is ochre-coloured, and in his four hands he holds a shell, a discus, a club, and a water-lily.

GAṄGĀ: Hinduism's holiest river, often personified as a goddess, the eldest daughter of Himavat (the Himālayas) and Menakā. The Purāṇas have a charming legend about her. She descended on the earth, flowing from the toes of Viṣhṇu, as a result of the prayers of the sage Bhagīratha (hence she is called Bhāgīrathī) in order to purify the ashes of King Sagara's 60,000 sons. Śhiva received her, as she fell angrily, in his matted hair in order to cushion the shock for the earth; from his hair she flowed out in seven streams, the *sapta-sindhava*. In the *Mahābhārata*, as the wife of King Śhāntanu, she bears a son Bhīṣhma. She is also called Devabhūti (Born in heaven), Mandākinī (Gently-flowing) and Tṛiśhrotaḥ (Triple-running, i.e. in heaven, earth, and hell).

GAṄGĀDATTA (Gift of Gaṅgā): Another name of *BHĪṢHMA*. See *VASU*.

GARUḌA: A mythical bird deity, offspring of Kaśhyapa and Vinatā.

GĀYATRĪ: The most sacred verse in the Vedas. "It is considered so holy that copyists often refrain from transcribing it." Wilson translates it as: "We meditate on that excellent light of the divine sun: may he illuminate our minds."

GHAṬOṬKACHA: Son of Bhīma and Hiḍimbā, sister of the rākṣhasa Hiḍimba.

HANUMAN: The monkey god of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He is the son of Vāyu, the wind god; hence he is able to fly. In the *Mahābhārata* he is brother of Bhīma (mythically the son of Vāyu).

HARA: A name of Śhiva.

HARI: A name of Viṣhṇu.

HASTINĀPURA (Elephant City): The capital of the Kauravas; its ruins have been identified about sixty miles north-east of Delhi.

HIḌIMBĀ: A rākṣhasa woman by whom Bhīma fathered a son, Ghaṭotkacha.

HIMAVAT: The Himālayas personified; Himavat is the husband of Menakā and father of Umā and Gaṅgā.

HIRAṆYA-GARBHA (Golden womb): The primal cosmic egg which, splitting in two, was the cause of creation—"with these two shells Brahmā formed the heavens and the earth; and in the middle he placed the sky."

HOMA: Food or other offering in a pūjā ceremony.

INDRA: The god of the sky or heaven. According to a legend in the *Mahābhārata*, he seduced Ahalyā, the wife of the sage Gautama; Gautama cursed him, and a thousand vaginal sores appeared on his body (hence his name Sayoni, "Vagina-marked"); these were later changed to eyes (hence his name Sahasrākṣha, "Thousand-eyed"). He is Arjuna's divine father.

INDRAPRASTHA: The capital of the Pāṇḍavas; the name is still used for a section of Delhi.

ITIHĀSA: Epic history or legend; a term applied specially [to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

JAGANNĀTHA (World's Lord): An incarnation of Viṣhṇu (or Kṛiṣhṇa) worshipped in Eastern India, specially in Puri Temple, Orissa. The image in the temple is without hands or feet, and resembles a near abstract stump of wood with large eyes and mouth painted in red and black. According to legend, Viśhvakarma, the architect of the gods, agreed to make an image of Jagannātha if left undisturbed, but was interrupted on the fifteenth day, and in anger left his work unfinished.

JANĀRDANA (Mankind's adored one): A name of Kṛiṣhṇa.

JARĀSAṀDHA (Assembled by Jarā): A king of Magadha, so named because he was born in two halves to the two wives of Bṛihadratha, and cast away. A female anti-god named Jarā joined the halves. An implacable enemy of Kṛiṣhṇa, he was killed by Bhīma after he refused to release the royal allies of the Pāṇḍavas he had captured in battle.

JAYADRATHA: King of Sindhu, and husband of Duḥśhalā, Duryodhana's only sister. He abducted Draupadī, was brought back and humiliated—his hair was shaved off—and, in the battle of Kurukṣhetra, was killed by Arjuna.

KAILĀSA: A Himālayan mountain, the abode of Śhiva and, in some legends, of Kuvera, god of wealth.

KĀLA (Black): A name of Yama, god of death. The Atharva-Veda says, "He pulled out the worlds and embraced them. He is their father and their son. There is no power higher than him." Sometimes applied to Śhiva, consort of Kālī.

KĀLĪ (Black): In the Vedas, Kālī is the black or fearsome tongue among "the seven flickering tongues of flame for devouring oblations of butter." In later myth, Kālī is the terrible, all-devouring consort of Śhiva, the goddess who blesses the devotee who realises the truth behind the mystery of time.

KALIYUGA (Kali's Age): Kali in dice games is the ace, and a symbol of ill luck. Kali Yuga is the fourth or present age of the world. It began in 3102 B.C., and will last 432,000 years, after which the universal cycle will recommence.

KALPA (Thought): One day and one night of Brahmā, together totalling 4,320,000,000 years.

KĀMA (Love, passion): Also known as Kāmadeva, god of love. His wife is Rati, goddess of desire. He carries a bow and arrows. The bow is of sugarcane, bees constitute the bowstring, and the arrows are flower-tipped; he rides a parrot, and his banner shows a fish on a red background.

KARMA: The Hindu theory of birth and re birth, developed in philosophical terms on the basis of cause and effect.

KARṆA: Son of Kuntī, by the son god Sūrya, before her marriage to Pāṇḍu. He was abandoned by Kuntī and brought up by Adhiratha, the charioteer, and his wife Rādhā. Karṇa joined the Kauravas though he knew he was half-brother of the Pāṇḍavas. He was born equipped with gold earrings and armour, and received a divine javelin from Indra. Arjuna killed him by unfair means with a crescent-shaped arrow. He is also called Aṅgarāja, King of Aṅga, and Kānīna, "the Bastard."

KAŚHYAPA ("Tortoise"): A Vedic sage; in the *Mahābhārata* he is supposed to have married Aditi and twelve other daughters of Dakṣha. The Atharva-Veda says, "The self-born Kaśhyapa sprang from Time," and, as a "tortoise," he is mythically supposed to have been the progenitor of creation. As creation's father, he is called Prajāpati (Lord of Creatures).

KĪCHAKA: Brother-in-law of the king of Virāṭa; he was rolled into a lump of flesh by Bhīma for making immoral advances to Draupadī.

KIṀPURUṢHA ("What man"): Aboriginals dwelling in the lower regions of the Himālayas, mentioned as warriors in the *Mahābhārata*. Not to be confused with Kinnaras, legendary horse-headed celestial musicians who live in the kingdom of Kuvera, god of wealth.

KIRĀṬAS: A tribe of forest-dwellers and hunters.

KṚISHṆA (Dark): In the *Mahābhārata*, the legend of Krishna's birth is: Vishṇu plucked a white and black hair from his head; the white entered Rohiṇi's womb, and became Balarāma, and the black entered Devakī's and became Kṛishṇa; hence Krishna is called Keśhava (or Black-haired One). Since his father Vasudeva was brother of Kuntī, wife of Pāṇḍu, Kṛishṇa is a first cousin of Yudhishṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna.

KṚITAVARMAN : One of the three Kuru warriors who massacred the sleeping Pāṇḍavas in their camp in a surprise night sortie. He is killed in a drunken brawl in Dvārakā.

KSHATRIYA : The second, warrior or ruling caste of Hinduism.

KUNTĪ: Mother of Karṇa during her virginhood by the sun god Sūrya; and mother of Yudhishṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna by King Pāṇḍu.

KUNTIBHOJA : King of the Kuntirāja; adoptive father of Kuntī.

KURU: Prince of the lunar race, ancestor of Dhṛitarāshṭra and Pāṇḍu; hence the race called the Kauravas.

KUŚHA: A special kind of grass (*poa cynosuroides*) used in Hindu sacred rituals.

KUVERA (Kubera): God of wealth, and chief of the Yakshas. His abode is the mountain of Kailāsa.

LAKSHMAṆA : A son of Duryodhana who was killed by Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. (In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he is the son of Daśharatha by Sumitrā, and twin-brother of Śhatrughna.)

LAKSHMĪ: Goddess of fortune, wife of Vishṇu, mother of Kāma.

LIṄGA, LIṄGAM: The phallus, an austerely stylised version of which is the symbol of Śhiva worship. It is always represented as erect, suggesting the difficult discipline of complete sexual control. India has twelve great centres of liṅga-worship (Somanātha, Śhrisaila, Mahātāla, Oṁkāra, Amareśhvara, Vaidyanātha, Rameśhvara, Bhīmaśhaṅkara, Viśhveśhvara, Triambaka, Gautameśha, Kedarnātha).

MĀDRĪ: Wife (with Kuntī) of Pāṇḍu; mother of Nakula and Sahadeva.

MAHARSHI (Great Sage): Title applied to a holy man, usually completely liberated saint.

MAṆIPURA (City of gems): A city on the sea-coast of Kaliṅga (the modern Orissa) ruled by Arjuna's son Vabhruvāhana.

MANU (Thinking creature): A generic name given to the fourteen progenitors of mankind. The first, Svayambhuva (Self-born) is credited with the composition of the Code of Manu, the traditionally accepted system of Hindu social ethics. Svayambhuva is supposed to have been born, 30,000,000 years ago, but the code gives evidences of having been written *circa* 500 B.C. and later.

MĀTĀLI: Charioteer of Indra.

MAYA: An anti-god architect of great skill. No to be confused with MĀYĀ.

MĀYĀ: Cosmic illusion, the deception by which the Divine One appears to be the Material Many, and by which the phenomenal world appears to be real. Also used to mean divine, supernatural power.

NĀGA: A snake, the cobra-capella. Also a mythical creature, with a human face, a serpent tail and a cobra neck. They are supposed to number a thousand; one of their beautiful females, Ulūpī, married Arjuna. Also, a non-Aryan tribe.

NAKULA: Twin son of Mādrī, Pāṇḍu's second wife. He married Kareṇumatī, princess of Chedi, and his son was named Nirāmitra.

NĀRADA: One of the seven great ṛishis; according to one legend, he was born from Brahmā's forehead, and according to another he is Kaśhyapa's son. He is the mischievous Brahmin in Vishṇu's heaven who asks teasing and impossible questions which the gods cannot answer.

NARAKA: The Hindu hell; Manu names twenty-one different hells. All are places of torture for the temporary consignment of the wicked and irreligious.

NĀRĀYAṆA (Water-movement): Brahmā, so called because he rested first on the cosmic waters.

NIṢHADA: A tribe of the Vindhya mountains.

OṀ (composite of A U Ṁ): Hinduism mystic syllable, used in all prayers and rituals, and variously interpreted. It is said to stand for the Hindu trinity (*a*=Vishṇu, *u*=Śhiva, *ṁ*=Brahmā); also for the four possible states of consciousness (*a*=waking, *u*=dreaming, *ṁ*=dreamless sleeping, and the incommunicable silence after the word = Nirvāṇa).

PAṀPĀ: Name of a river and a lake in the Tuṅgabhadra mountain range in central India.

PĀÑCHAJANYA: Name of Kṛishṇa's conch, "formed out of the shell of the sea-demon Pañchajana."

PĀÑCHĀLA: Probably the territory around the modern Punjab in north India, the name of the kingdom of Draupadī's father.

PĀṆḌU ("Pale"): Brother of Dhṛitarāśhṭra, and king of Hastināpura; father of the Pāṇḍavas. Called "Pale" because he apparently suffered from some wasting disease.

PĀṆINI: Sanskrit's great grammarian, author of the *Pāṇiniyan* (*circa* 400 B.C.) which consists of 3996 sūtras or aphorisms arranged in eight sections. The difference between European and Hindu ideas of grammer is well explained by Dowson: "In Europe, grammar has been looked upon as only a means to an end, the medium through which a knowledge of language and literature is acquired. With the Pandit, grammar was a science; it was studied for its own sake, and investigated with the most minute criticism," comparable in some ways to the recent semantic studies in the West.

PARĀŚHARA: Grandson of Vasiṣhṭha; his liaison with Satyavatī produced Vyāsa, the author-compiler of the *Mahābhārata*.

PARĪKṢHIT: Son of Abhimanyu and grandson of Arjuna; father of Janamejaya. Killed by Aśhvatthāman in his mother Uttarā's womb, he was given new life by Krishna.

PĀTĀLA: The seven infernal regions, abodes of the Nāgas, Daityas, Yakṣhas and others.

PITṚIS: Manes, spirits of the ancestors to whom *piṇḍas* (rice balls) and water are offered.

PRADYUMNA: A son of Kṛiṣhṇa by Rukmiṇī. His wife's name was Prabhāvatī.

PRAJĀPATI (Creatures' Lord): (1) Indra, according to the Vedas; (2)Brahmā, according to Manu; (3) also applied to the ten "mind-born" sons of Brahmā: Marīchi, Atri, Aṅgiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Vasiṣhṭha, Prachetas (or Dakṣha), Bhṛigu, and Nārada.

PRĀKṚIT: "The Prākṛits are provincial dialects of the Sanskrit, exhibiting more or less deterioration from the original language; and they occupy an intermediate position between that language and the modern vernaculars of India, very similar to that of the Romance language between the Latin and the modern language of Europe" (Dowson).

PUROCHANA: Duryodhana's spy, who was instructed to burn the Pāṇḍavas down in their house, but was burnt alive in his by Bhīma.

PURUṢHOTTAMA (Best among men): A title of Viṣhṇu, "the supreme soul." Puri, Orissa, is Puruṣhottama-pīṭha, the city sacred to Kṛiṣhṇa.

RAJASŪYA (Royal sacrifice): "A great sacrifice performed at the installation of a king, religious in its nature but political in its operation, because it implied that he who instituted the sacrifice was a supreme lord, a king over kings, and his tributary princes were required to be present at the rite." See *AŚHAVAMEDHA*.

RĀKṢHASA: Very likely a non-Aryan, treated as a demon able to change form at will by the ruling Aryans in ancient India. Sometimes associated with the Drāviḍian race—Rāvaṇa was a rākṣhasa king.

RĀMA: The royal hero of the epic by Vālmīki, the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

RATI (Passion, Desire): Daughter of Dakṣha, and wife of Kāma, the god of love.

RĀVAṆA: Ten-headed and twenty-armed rākṣhasa, ruler of Laṅkā (Sri Lanka), whose abduction of Sītā and humiliation by Rāma forms the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rākṣhasa should not be translated as "demon"; "anti-god," though inaccurate, is closer.

RUKMIṆĪ: Daughter of the king of Vidarbha, and wife of Kṛiṣhṇa. Her brother Rukmin prevented her from marrying Kṛiṣhṇa, whom she loved, because Kṛiṣhṇa had killed one of his royal friends, Kaṁsa; so he had her betrothed to Śhiśhupāla, king of the Chedis. Krishna abducted her on her wedding day while she was on her way to the temple for the solemnisation of the marriage. When Kṛiṣhṇa died, she and seven other wives committed *sati*.

SAÑJAYA: Charioteer and adviser of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra.

SANNYĀSI: A Brahmin in the last (renunciation) stage of the four stages of his life. Popularly used for any ascetic.

SARASVATĪ (Flowing, Mellifluent): A river; also personification of the river as a goddess, the consort of Brahmā, goddess of speech and knowledge.

SĀTYAKI: A relative of Kṛiṣhṇa's; he was Kṛiṣhṇa's charioteer and was killed by Kṛitavarman in a drunken brawl in Dvārakā.

SATYAVATĪ: Mother of Vyāsa by her liaison with the sage Parāśhara; wife of Śhāntanu, and mother of Vichitravīrya and Chitrāṅgada.

ŚHAKUNI: Brother of Gāndhārī, and uncle of the Kauravas.

ŚHALYA: King of the Madra and brother of Mādrī, second wife of Pāṇḍu. He switched to the side of the Kauravas at the beginning of the war. After Karṇa's death he was installed general on the last day, and was killed by Yudhiṣhṭhira.

ŚHĀMBA: A cynical and profligate son of Krishna by Jambāvatī. His irreverence caused him to be cursed by the three sages, Viśhvāmitra, Durvāsas, and Nārada, into giving birth to an iron mace which was responsible for the destruction of Kṛiṣhṇa's race. In addition, Durvāsas cursed Śhāmba with leprosy.

ŚHĀNTANU (Calm): Son of Pratīpa and father of Bhīshma; hence, the grandfather of Dhṛitarāṣhṭra.

ŚHĀSTRA: Holy book, written principle, or precept; any law-book of the Hindus.

ŚHATARŪPA (Hundred-Formed): The first woman, according to Hindu myth The daughter of Brahmā.

ŚHIKHAṆḌIN (See *Ambā*): One of the two princesses Bhishmā abducted for marriage to Vichitravīrya. Before she died, she had obtained a boon from Viṣhṇu that she would be re-born as Śhikhaṇḍin, son of Drupada, and take revenge on Bhīṣhma by slaying him in the war. Though Arjuna slew Bhīṣhma under Śhikhaṇḍin's protection (Bhīṣhma having vowed not to raise his hands against a woman), legend says that the fatal arrow was fired by Śhikhaṇḍin himself.

ŚHIŚHUPĀLA: Son of the sister of Kṛiṣhṇa's father Vasudeva; hence Kṛiṣhṇa's first cousin. But because Kṛiṣhṇa had abducted and married his would-be wife, Rukmiṇī, he became Kṛiṣhṇa's enemy. He was killed by Kṛiṣhṇa in the Rājasūya ritual of Yudhiṣhṭhira's coronation.

ŚHIVA: The destroying aspect of the Hindu divine trinity, Brahmā-Viṣhṇu-Śhiva. He is also called Aghora (Horrible), Chandraśhekhara (Moon-Crested), Maheśha (Great Lord); Triambaka (Three-Eyed), Mahākāla (Lord of Cosmic Time), and Kapālamālin (Skull-Garlanded).

ŚHRĀDDHA: Formal Hindu ritual for the dead.

ŚHŪDRA: The fourth or menial caste.

SMṚITI (Remembered): Teaching handed down by tradition as distinct from revelation (*śhruti*, heard). The *Mahābhārata* is a work of smṛiti; according to Manu, "Śhruti is the Veda, Smṛiti is the code of Law."

SOMA: The juice of a milky creeper (*asclepias acida*) which, fermented, was drunk during the performance of religious rituals. *Soma* also means the moon.

ŚRI (ŚHRI): Consort of Vishṇu; goddess of fortune and prosperity. The term is also used as a prefix to signify "respectable, honourable."

SUBHADRĀ: Daughter of Vasudeva, sister of Kṛishṇa, wife of Arjuna, and mother of Abhimanyu. Kṛishṇa's elder brother Balarāma wanted to marry her to Duryodhana, but Kṛishna instructed Arjuna to abduct her.

SŪRYA: The sun god. The 13th century temple in Konārka, Orissa, is dedicated to him.

SŪTRA (Thread, String): A wise rule or aphorism.

SVARGA: The heaven of Indra.

SVASTIKA: The Hindu svastika, a cross with the ends bent round; a mystical mark supposed to bring good luck.

TANTRA (Rule, Ritual): Religious and magical works in later Hinduism which personify and glorify the female energy Shakti. The five essentials of Tantra are indulgence in (1) Maḍya (wine), (2) Māṁsa (flesh), (3) Matsya (fish), (4) Mudrā (mystic gestures), (5) Maithuna (sexual intercourse). Shakti is both benevolent (Umā, Gaurī) and malevolent (Durgā, Kālī). Shakti worshippers are of two kinds, right-hand and left-hand. "The worship of the right-hand Shaktas is comparatively decent, but that of the left-hand is addressed to the fierce forms of Shakti, and is most licentious."

TRIGARTA (Triple-Guarded): A territory in North India, identified with a part of the modern Punjab.

TRIMŪRTI (Three-formed): The Hindu triad, Brahmā-Vishṇu-Śhiva.

TWICE-BORN (Dvi-ja): Term used to designate Brahmins whose sacred thread denotes a second, spiritual birth.

UGRASENA: King of Mathurā, father of the demon Kaṁsa, who deposed him After killing Kaṁsa, Kṛishṇa re-installed Ugrasena.

ULŪPĪ: Daughter of Kauravya, king of the Nāgas. Arjuna formed a marriage liaison with her, and she was a nurse to her step-son Vabhruvāhana (son of Arjuna by Chitrāṅgadā).

UPANISHADS (Sitting reverently near, Esoteric doctrine): Philosophic treatises of Hinduism written between 1000 and 500 B.C., about 150 in number, dealing with fundamental questions of the origin of the universe, the identity of man, and the relation of the Ātman to Brahman.

URVAŚHĪ: Celestial nymph who was cursed to live upon the earth as the mistress-wife of Purūravas. Her amorous advances were rejected by Arjuna, as a result of which she cursed him to spend one year of his life in exile as a hermaphrodite.

UTTAMAUJAS: A great fighter, ally of the Pāṇḍavas in the Kurukṣhetra war.

UTTARA: Son of king Virāṭa; killed by Śhalya. His sister was also called Uttarā (accent on the last syllable); she was given in marriage to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, after Arjuna refused to marry her himself.

VABHRUVĀHANA: Son of Arjuna by Chitrāṅgadā, princess of Maṇipura.

VĀHANA (Vehicle): Any animal vehicle of a Hindu god. Brahmā's vehicle is Haṁsa (a cross between a swan and a goose; swoose?); Viṣhṇu's Garuḍa (half-eagle, half-man); Śhiva's Nāndi (a bull); Indra's Airāvata (an elephant). Yama rides a buffalo, Kārttikeya a peacock, Kāma the sea-animal *makara* or a parrot, Varuṇa a fish, Ganeśha a rat, Vāyu an antelope, Durgā a lion, and so on, until all creation is woven in a harmonious web of animal-human-god ecology.

VAIŚHAMPĀYANA: A great sage and pupil of Vyāsa; after learning the *Mahābhārata* from Vyāsa, he recited it to king Janamejaya at a *yajña*. He is also supposed to have written the esoteric "Black" Yajur-Veda.

VAIŚHYA: The third caste in Hinduism, consisting of traders, merchants, and agriculturists. "Vaiśhya" in the sense of "seller" can also mean a professional dancing or entertaining woman in a royal court.

VĀRĀṆASĪ: The city of Kāśhi, anglicised as "Benares," one of Hinduism's great centres of holy pilgrimage.

VĀRĀṆĀVATA: A city where the Pāṇḍavas lived part of their exile.

VARUṆA (All-Embracer): The oldest Vedic deity, creator of heaven and earth; he is personified lord of the waters in later Hindu mythology.

VASIṢHṬHA (Super-eminent): One of the seven great sages and ten Prajāpatis. He plays a large role in the *Rāmāyaṇa,* where his celebrated enmity with the sage Viśhvāmitra is described at length.

VASU: A *riṣhi* whose austerities raised him to the level of the Pole Star. Also, celestial beings re-born as the children of Gaṅgā and Śhāntanu, Bhīṣhma is a Vasu.

VASUDEVA: Father of Kṛiṣhṇa, by Devakī (the youngest of his seven wives), and brother of Kuntī. The same word accented on the first syllable, Vāsudeva, is a name of Kṛiṣhṇa, meaning "son of Vasudeva."

VĀTSYĀYANA: A sage, author of the *Kāma Sūtra*, a book on erotics, and *Nyāya-Bhāṣha* (the science of grammar).

VĀYU: The wind god.

VEDA (Wisdom): Four early (2000 B.C.) collection of hymns and songs (Ṛig, Yajur, Sāma, Atharva) held in veneration as revealed scriptures by Hindus.

VICHITRAVĪRYA (Remarkably brave): The younger son of Śhāntanu and Satyavatī.

VIDURA: Son of Vyāsa by a low-caste slave girl. Vidura is credited with impartial wisdom, and occupies a high status in the *Mahābhārata*, in part because he raised his voice in sole protest against the disrobing of Draupadī.

VIṢHṆU (One who pervades): The preserving aspect of the Hindu divine triad (Brahmā-Vişhṇu-Shiva). Also called Anantasāyana (Sleeper on the endless serpent), Nārāyaṇa (Mover on the waters), and Pitāmbara (Dressed in yellow).

VIŚHVĀMITRA (Unattached to the world): A sage, who though born a Kshatriya, became one of the seven great *rişhis* by the strength of his penances and meditations. He is the legendary enemy of the sage Vasişhṭha; and his relations with the apsarā Menakā led to the birth of Śhakuntalā.

VṚIKODARA (Wolf-bellied): A name applied to Bhīma, because of his gargantuan appetite.

VYĀSA (Arranger): Legendary composer of the *Mahābhārata*.

YĀDAVA: Kṛishṇa's race or tribe; they were nomads but later ruled in Dvārakā in Gujarat, West India.

YAJÑA: Any Hindu sacrifice or ritual in which fire is the central deity. *See DAKṢHIṆĀ*.

YAKṢHA: A class of divine beings, followers of the god of wealth, Kuvera.

YAMA (Restrainer): God of death; according to legend, he is the son of the sun.

YAMUNĀ: A river, tributary of the Gaṅgā, personified as the daughter of the sun.

YAVANA (Sanskrit for "Ionian"): Greeks; foreigners.

YOGA: One of the six systems of Hindu philosophy, involving physical and mental discipline.

YUDHIŞHṬHIRA: The eldest of the five Pāṇḍava brothers. According to myth, he is the son of Dharma, god of justice.

YUGA: A world cycle. There are supposed to be four yugas (Kṛita, Treta, Dvâpara, and the present Kali). A Mahāyuga (great age) is 4,320,000 human years, and 8,640,000 human years constitute a *kalpa* (or one night and one day of Brahmā).

YUYUTSU: Son of Dhṛitarāşhṭra by a Vaiśhya wife whose name is unknown: he went over to the side of the Pāṇḍavas before the battle began, and ruled Indraprastha when Yudhişhṭhira retired.

Bibliography

BHAṆḌÅRKAR ORIENTAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, POOṆA
A Prospectus of a New and Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata. Poona, 1919.

When the Bhaṇḍārkar Institute embarked on its "fifteen year" project of bringing out a Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* in 1919, they had no idea that the fifteen years would stretch to more than forty. This prospectus, in 40 pages, provides an excellent account of the importance of the *Mahābhārata* and its relevance to Indian life; it explains why a new edition is required, and the complex problems involved in its preparation; apart from the methodology, it gives a full list of the time and expenses (an average of Rs 1000 per month for a continuous period of some fifteen years.) The Advisory Committee for this project consisted of some very eminent names, among them Ashutosh Mukherjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Annie Besant.

BHOOTHALINGAM, MATHURĀM
Sons of Pāṇḍu. Bhoothalingam, 25 Tughlaq Road, New Delhi, 1966.

Mrs Bhoothalingam retells the story of the *Mahābhārata* for children, treating it as "an epic of great beauty and pathos;" and stressing the "gentle humanity" and "universal appeal." This naturally involves severe editing of the epic's horrific scenes and episodes. Mrs Bhoothalingam writes a clean, economical style, and the illustrations by Baniprosonno (mostly line drawings) have a graceful, evocative quality that will appeal to child and adult alike.

DUTT, MANMATHA NĀTH (translator)
The Mahābhārata. Elysium Press, Calcutta, 1895-1905.

This is the second complete translation, in three volumes, of the *Mahābhārata*, by the Rector of Keshub Academy, the only one to give a mostly verse-by-verse rendering. Dutt follows the Kisari Mohan Ganguli version closely in many places, but is more prudish: Ganguli Latinises, Dutt omits. In Book I (Adi Parva), LXIII, "śhlokas 50 to 52 not translated for obvious reason," he explains; in the same book, CIV, śhlokas 14 to 20 are also "not translated for obvious reasons."

DUTT, ROMESH CHUNDER
The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata (Condensed into English Verse).
Dent's Everyman's Library, 1910, reprinted 1944.

R.C. Dutt was "the first of his race to attain the rank of divisional Commissioner" in the Indian Civil Service; he also received the Companionship of the Indian Empire. His well-known translations of the two Sanskrit epics were finished in 1897; he wrote his "Translator's Epilogue" for the *Mahābhārata* version in 1898 in the University College, London. His selection of passages for translation is scrappy (he begins with the tournament where Arjuna and Karṇa show their skills [Ādi Parva] and ends with the horse sacrifice performed by Yudhiṣhṭhira [Aśhvamedha Parva], leaving out much of the Ādi Parva ["The Beginnings"] and the whole of the Mausala ["The Battle with Clubs"], Mahāprasthāna ["The Great Journey"] and Svargarohaṇa ["Heaven"] Parvas.) He defends his decision by explaining that "A poem of ninety thousand couplets is more than what the average reader can stand; and the heterogeneous nature of its contents does not add to the interest of the work. If the religious works of Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, the philosophy of Hobbes and Locke, the commentaries of Blackstone and the ballads of Percy, together with the tractarian writings of Newman, Keble, and Pusey, were all thrown into blank verse and incorporated with the *Paradise Lost*, the reader would scarcely be much to blame if he failed to appreciate that delectable compound. A complete translation of the *Mahā-bhārata* therefore into English verse is neither possible nor desirable. . . ."

Dutt's choice of *Locksley Hall* hexameter as the best medium for verse translation of the *Mahābhārata*—"the one finally adopted," he says, "was a nearer approach to the Sanskrit *śhloka* than any other familiar English metre known to me"—is delightfully if not successfully argued; the other interest is his character criticism—in the style of A.C. Bradley, a contemporary, whose *Shakespearean Tragedy* appeared in 1894—of the epic's amazing variety of men and women.

The book has a useful, though out-dated, bibliography, and an introduction by S.K. Ratcliffe; it is dedicated to "The Right Hon. Professor F. Max Müller, who has devoted his lifetime to the elucidation of the learning, literature, and religion of ancient India." The *Mahābhārata* rendering appeared originally in 1899 with an introduction by Max Müller and "twelve photogravures from original illustration designed from Indian sources by E. Stuart Hardy."

GĀṄGULI, KIŚARI MOHAN (translator)
The Mahābhārata. Bharata Karalaya Press, Calcutta, 1883-1896.

This complete and faithful translation—the first of the two complete renderings into English of the epic and the only edition now available—is the monumental accomplishment strangely referred to by scholars and bibliographers alike, as "the P.C. Roy translation." Behind that error is a story as intriguing as that of the identity of Shakespeare's W.H. of the Sonnets.

Pratāpa Chandra Roy was born in the village of Shānko in the Burdwān district of Bengal on 15 March 1842. His father was Rāmjai Roy; his mother, Drabamai Devi, died when he was two and a half. He was brought up by a widow who worked for a Brahmin in the Khulnā district. As a boy he would pick up coconuts thrown as offerings in the Gaṅgā or left by the waterside, sell them, and with the money beg his foster mother to buy him books. Impressed, the Brahmin employer put him in a school.

When he grew up, he became a bookseller in Calcutta. By 1869 he had put by enough money to by a small printing press and start a publishing concern. By the end of 1876 he had brought out a complete Bengali translation of the *Mahābhārata*. Then a new idea fired him: the complete *Mahābhārata* in English. His purpose was to unfold the richness of the Indian heritage to the British rulers and to foreigners in general; as his widow innocently explained in her epilogue, attached to the last book in 1896, "If a knowledge of the mind of the people is of value to the administration of the country, who will deny the utility of an English translation of the *Mahābhārata* to the British Government of India?"

He knew his own English was not good enough; and press work kept him too busy anyway. Luck brought him Bābu Kiśari Mohan Gāṅguli, a man with a brilliant academic record in English; Gāṅguli was entrusted with the work of translating the epic while Roy went around collecting funds from "peasants and princes, Anglo-Indian officials and English and American sympathisers to warrant him in going forward"—for his ambition (in which he succeeded) was to distribute the translated volumes free. His first wife died; he married again in 1886; in 1889 he was made, by Queen Victoria, a Companion of the Order of the British Empire; he died of an undiagnosed illness on 10 January 1895. His will directed that his property be sold and the money employed for three purposes—the completion of the English *Mahābhārata*, the erection of a temple to Śhiva in his village, and the excavation of a tank there for the use of the villagers.

Bābu Kiśari Mohan Gāṅguli, who, "like a literary Atlas, bore the heavy burden of the translation," gets mentioned only in the last volume of the English translation. Though he had no hand at all in the translation, Roy put his name on the title page of the first nine volumes. The ambiguity that transformed a publisher into a translator and left K.M. Gāṅguli's glory unsung has, to my knowledge, been spotted only by Ronald Inden and Maureen Patterson, compilers of the University of Chicago's Bibliography to South Asian Studies; by K.M. Nott in the Janus Press edition of the first two books of the *Mahābhārata*; and by A.C. Macdonnell in his *History of Sanskrit Literature*, where the translation is listed in the bibliography as having been published at "the expense of P.C. Roy" (it was really at K.M. Gāṅguli's expense!).

The "utility" was quickly noticed. Lord Dufferin sanctioned a grant of Rs 11,000 (whose purchasing power equivalent today would be around $30,000), and Lord Ripon gave "a handsome contribution." Sir Rivers Thompson "was pleased to sanction a grant of Rs 5000; Sir Auckland Colvin gave Rs 2000 when he was appointed the Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Provinces; Sir Alfred Croft granted Rs 5000. The official list is augmented with American scholars and benefectors—Professor Lanman, Professor Maurice Bloomfield of Hopkins University and others.

But K. M. Gāṅguli's was entirely a labour of love. "My husband scarcely exaggerated the truth," wrote P.C. Roy's widow, "when he used to say that. . . he was only the hand that did the work while Bābu Kiśari Mohan was the head that directed it. While lying on his death bed, he earnestly appealed to

Bābu Kiśari Mohan to complete the undertaking. With tears in his eyes, Bābu Kiśari Mohan readily gave the assurance that was solicited, saying that he would not, on any account, give up the work."

It is, even by twentieth century standards, a splendid piece of dedicated work. The translation reads smoothly, and the translator's notes indicate the care he took to compare different recensions and to consult the various commentaries (he greatly favours Nīlakaṇṭha's). The supreme irony is that the K.M. Gāṅguli translation, now re-issued from Calcutta's Oriental Press in 9 volumes, nowhere mentions his name, but openly credits P.C. Roy as "translator and publisher" on the title page of each volume.

In his "Translator's Postscript," at the end of Volume XI (1896), Gāṅguli explains that "Roy was against anonymity. I was for it." He was afraid no one person could finish "the whole of the gigantic work." "It was, accordingly, resolved to withhold the name of the translator." But hardly a fourth of the work had been accomplished when "an influential Indian journal came down upon poor Pratāpa Chandra Roy and accused him openly of being a party to a great literary imposture"—that of posing as "the translator of Vyāsa's work when, in fact, he was only the publisher." Gāṅguli continues: "Now that the translation has been completed, there can be no longer any reason for withholding the name of the translator. The entire translation is practically the work of one hand." Chāru Chandra Mookerjee helped with portions of the Ādi and Sabhā Parvas; "about four forms of the Sabhā Parva were done by Professor Krishṇa Kamal Bhaṭṭachārya."

KARVE, IRĀWATĪ

Yugānta, Deshmukh Prakashan, Poona, 1969; Sangam paperback, Orient Longman, 1974.

The Marāṭhi original of this remarkable book appeared in 1967 and was awarded the Sāhitya Akādemi prize. Mrs Irāwatī Kārve was born in 1905; she died in 1970. Her fame as a literary critic and social analyst rests on *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* and *Yugānta; The End of an Epoch*. No praise is too high for *Yugānta*. Its acuteness of historical perception, subtlety of character analyses, and depth of social observations merit only superlatives. Even when she hazards a guess, the stimulation provided by the process of Mrs Kārve's intellectual curiosity and sensitive imagination is a delight.

Primarily her book is a study of Vyāsa's characters, and she reads shrewdly between Vyāsa's lines in order to arrive at her conclusions. No one and nothing is sacrosanct. As Dr Norman Brown says in his Foreword, "Irāwatī Kārve studies the humanity of the *Mahābhārata*'s great figures and no one of them emerges for her as wholly good or wholly bad . . . . All the great personages in the *Mahābhārata* are cut down in her analysis to human size." This sounds unkind and may give an erroneous impression; Irāwatī Karve's intention is not to belittle the epic's figures; it is simply to see them as relevant to our lives. Draupadī, Yudhṣiṭhira and Gāndhārī are brilliantly discussed; and an eminently revealing chapter is on the relationship between Vidura and Yudhiṣhṭhira, "Father and Son."

A memorable work of affectionate scholarship and critical acumen tempered by poetic imagination, *Yugānta* is an indispensable companion to any serious student of the epic.

LĀL, P. (transcreator)
The Mahābhārata of Vyāsa. Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1968.

P. Lāl's śhloka-by-śhloka transcreation of the *Mahābhārata* was begun in November 1968, and Writers Workshop started issuing it in hardbound monthly fascicules averaging 64 pages each. One hundred and thirty-two volumes have appeared till 1979 and the work is progressing exactly on schedule. The project is expected to be completed by November 1990. Elaborate notes and introductions have been provided in many of the volumes. For a complete listing, with extensive notes, of books in English on, and English translations of, the *Mahābhārata* see P. Lāl's *An Annotated Mahābhārata Bibliography* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1967; revised edition 1980).

NARASIṀHAN, C.V. (translator)
The Mahābhārata: *An English Version based on Selected Verses.*
Columbia University Press, New York, 1965.

Done during time taken off from his exacting work as Under Secretary of the United Nations, Chakravarthi V. Narasiṁhan's 216-page version of the *Mahābhārata* was prepared for the Columbia College Programme of Translations from the Oriental Classics. Workmanlike and readable (though not in contemporary idiom), it is the only one that takes advantage of the Poonā Bhaṇḍārkar text (for nine books; the P.C. Roy text is used for the rest).

By sticking to his purpose of giving "a straightforward narrative account of the main theme of the epic: the rivalry between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas," Narasiṁhan forsakes the poetic beauties of the epic in favour of the hard core story. An appendix lists the verses selected as the basis for this very free "translation." The glossary has brief explanations of the Sanskrit names, and in his introduction Narasiṁhan summarises the epic narrative and adds short appreciations of the important characters.

Kiśari Mohan Gāṅguli, in his translated English version, translated the franker portions of the epic—those dealing specifically with sexual details—into Latin; M.N. Dutt omitted them altogether, with a note defending the moral value of his decision, in his "complete" translation. C.V. Narasiṁhan omits them also. In attempting to retain the old-world flavour, Narasiṁhan in places unnecessarily slips into awkward rhetoric and archaism ("O King, I shall now dispel, once and for all, your apprehension lest some one may again challenge you to a gambling game!"; "O Lord, console them with soothing words fraught with truth!"; "Availing yourself of that opportunity, and warned by a sign that I will make beforehand, you should slay him when he is in that difficult situation.")

PUSALKER, A.D.
Studies in Epics and Puranas of India (Bharatīya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1955).

This excellent book by one of India's most learned Indologists is a collection of six long essays: "Purāṇic Cosmogony"; "Were the Purāṇas originally in Prākrit?"; "Vāyu Purāna versus Śhiva Purāna"; "Kuruśhravana and Kuru-Saṁvarana"; "Historicity of Kṛsna"; and "Epic and Purānic Studies." The last two are specially recommended to readers of the *Mahābhārata*; "Epic and Purānic Studies" is a painstakingly collected, annotated list of books and essays on the Purānas and on the *Mahābhārata* in recent years. An intellectual and bibliographical feast.

RĀGHAVAN, V.
The Mahābhārata (Condensed in the Poet's own words).
G.A. Natesan & Co., Madras, 1935.

A helpful, low-priced, pocket-sized paperback with the Sanskrit text and a closely literal English translation side by side. This book appeared first in 1935, quickly ran into four editions, and since then has mysteriously stayed out of print. The selections from Vyāsa's original were made by Pandit A.M. Srinivāsachāriar ("it is easy," says the foreword, "to criticise the result and express one's surprise at the omission of certain passages and the inclusion of others"). The translation is by Dr V. Rāghavan, an acknowledged authority on Sanskrit literature, who died in 1978. "Every effort has been made to render the English translation both faithful and readable. . . .Such 'frequents' as *tada* (then), *tataḥ* (afterwards) and *tatra* (there), except where they definitely contribute to the sense—these are left untranslated." Though it overcolours the religious element in the epic and plays down the narrative, Dr Rāghavan's *Mahābhārata* does not emasculate the original: it retains the casual, precise beauty of nature description, and the unembarrassed statement of intimate biological detail.

There is a useful "Index to the Proper Names Occurring in the Text," and a concise note on "The Message of the *Mahābhārata*" by the translator ("Nothing less than Truth and Right, Satya and Dharma, form the theme of the great epic"). The former President of the Indian Republic, S. Rādhākrishṇan, then a Professor, contributed a Foreword in which he interprets the *Mahābhārata* as an attempt to illustrate the truth that "the mystery of life is a creative sacrifice."

RĀJĀGOPĀLACHĀRI, C.
Mahābhārata. Bhāratīya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1951.

The *Mahābhārata* of "Rājājī" (as the elder statesman was affectionately addressed in India) had proved to be extremely popular in this cheap, paperback edition (58,000 copies in four years, 1951-55). "Rājājī" played a significant role in India's political life: he was associated with Mahātmā Gāndhī in the Civil Disobedience movement against the British, was Chief Minister of Madras, Governor of West Bengal, Home Minister of India, the first Indian Governor-General of the country, and founder, in his eighties in 1960, of the Swatantra (Freedom) Party.

His version of the *Mahābhārata* is the work of a practical moralist (he has a book on Marcus Aurelius). In 1943, he decided "to employ some of the scanty leisure of a busy life" to cover the *Mahābhārata* narrative in a series of 107 stories designed for Tamil children. The re-telling was done for the Tamil weekly *Kalki*, and the first story dealt with Śhiśhupāla. Later he put these stories into English, a "substantial part" of the translation from Tamil being done by two "kind friends," P. Śeṣhādri and S. Krishṇamūrti. "Every sentence had for me a fragrance of the living past. This quality can never be preserved or brought out in an English translation."

This English version of a Tamil re-telling is sometimes mistaken for a translation from Vyāsa's Sanskrit The stories are efficiently told, but—like all children's *Rāmāyaṇas* and *Mahābhāratas* in India, including the famous Bengali ones of Rāmānanda Chaṭṭerjee—heavily edited, "disinfected," and prettified. Little is left to the imagination, and too many obvious explanatory adjectives ("harsh words," "aggressive vanity," "hard discipline," "perverse flouting," "deeply agitated," "quaking hearts," "spellbound silence," "wily strategems," and so on) tend to block the steady epic flow.

RAO, ŚHĀNTĀ RĀMEŚHWAR
The Mahābhārata. Orient Longman, 1974.

In this Saṅgam paperback edition based on the original hardcover issued by the same publishers in 1968, Śhāntā Rāmeśhwar Rāo re-tells the story of Vyāsa's epic in easily digestible English. This is in no way a translation. Smt. Rao is convinced that the *Mahābhārata* has "a message for all people, young and old, men, women and children," for which reason she focuses her energies on bringing out the message. This didacticism tends to slow down the pace of the narrative, as it did in Rājagopālachāri's rendering.

SUBRĀMAṆIAM, KAMALĀ
Mahābhārata. Bhāratīya Vidyā Bhavan, Bombay, 1965.

"For a long time," writes Smt. Subrāmaṇiam in her Preface, "I have wanted to write a book which will rectify" the "faults" that she noted in earlier translations of the epic. "Not one is satisfactory. They are all *literal* translations." She disagrees with the attempt to render "Bharatarṣhabha" ("very pleasing to the ear in Sanskrit") literally into English as "O bull of the Bharata race!" "Again, a woman is addressed as 'Madagajagaaminī' in Sanskrit. In English it has to be 'O woman with the gait of an elephant in rut'! This sounds so ridiculous. Again, I have seen several condensations of the *Mahābhārata*: books which give us just the story of the epic. Here again, there is a handicap. The story is there of course. But the characters in the story are not handled properly. They cannot be, since there is not enough space for it."

So, to bring out the "Greek tragedy" quality of the story, "I have rendered the epic into English," in a large book of over 750 pages. Smt. Subrāmaṇiam admits "It is not quite a translation. One might call it a 'free translation.' I have tried to narrate the story as dramatically as possible. I have narrated it in simple, straightforward English. In this task, if one has to retain the spirit of the epic and the atmosphere, one has to fall back upon the quaint, old-fashioned English. This seems to suit the epic perfectly. At times crisp clear English does not work."

The result is an unsatisfactory amalgam. Smt. Subrāmaṇiam, with the finest of intentions, has produced only the most detailed re-telling of Vyāsa's epic.

VAN BUITENEN, J.A.B, (translator and editor)
The Mahābhārata (Vols. 1-3). The University of Chicago Press, 1973, 1975, 1978.

The magnificent undertaking to translate the complete *Mahābhārata* was begun in 1970; Professor Van Buitenen, Head of the Department of Sanskrit of Chicago University, had completed the first five books (Ādi, Sabhā, Vana, Virāṭa, Udyoga) when he passed away at the age of 51 in Champaign-Urbana in September 1979 The text he followed is the scholarly and dependable recension of the Bhaṇḍārkar Oriental Research Institute at Poonā; prepared under the supervision of the late V. S. Sukthaṅkar. His is an annotated translation, with each of the three volumes so far published carrying a detailed introduction, glossary and index. Professor Van Buitenen's synoptic commentaries are an indispensable guide to the jungle of the *Mahābhārata* story and sub-plots and comprise, along with the other material, the most painstaking and readable study of the epic's style, narrative, and mythology. " . . . My concourse and discourse with colleagues in history, art, anthropology, history of religions, political science, and even demography convinced me that an Indologist owes as much to other disciplines bearing on India as to his own. It was out of this conviction that the decision arose to open up the great epic of India to all of us."

What splendid fruits that decision has produced is immediately obvious to anyone who goes through the first three volumes. In particular, the introduction to the Virāṭa Parva in Volume 3 is a masterpiece of evocative, yet solidly based, interpretation. This is not a śhloka-by-śhloka version, though the parva, sub-parva, and śhloka references are provided in the margin; Professor Van Buitenen does a run-on translation, mostly in prose, with occasional "verse" quatrains. "I have tried to give as fair and responsive an English translation as is within my ability. . . ." He admits that one weakness of his rendering is that while "the original was meant to be listened to," his is "inevitably intended to be read."

A great pity, because this tends to artificialise the oral immediacy of the epic by giving it a bookish, literary flavour. Even fairly common words like *dharma*, *kṣhatriya* and *mahātmā* are given equivalents that appear to be unnecessary. "For *dharma* my choice has been a capitalised 'Law' not only because 'Law' is approximate in its evocative connotations, but also because in practice it allows for syntactic variations: according to Law, and law-minded, law-spirited, law abiding, law-like, and even lawly—the last on the analogy of lovely . . . .I am very much aware that such literalism might result in a quasi-translation. . . . Terms for social ranks, *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣhatriya*, *vaiśhya* and *śhudra*, have been rendered by the Anglicised 'brahmin', and 'baron', 'commoner', and 'serf' respectively. For kṣhatriya the rendering 'baron' was chosen, not only because in its mediaeval sense it is an acceptable translation, but also because it permits further derivation: 'baronage' (kṣhatra), 'baronial' (kṣhtriya), 'baroness' (kṣhatriyā). . . ." It is surprising to see a Sanskritist of such sensitivity and eminence as Professor Buitenen arguing for the merits of a far-out word like "baron" as an approximation for kṣhtriya, but this indicates the hazards that face Sanskrit translation into English, and the compromises that even the most well-meaning of translators decide to make.

Consider the inappropriateness in the Indian context of the following passage: "When the world had been rid of barons by that scion of the Bhṛgus, the baronesses, sire, came to the brahmins craving for their wombs Brahmins of strict vows fell with them, at the right season, tiger among men, nor out of season. Those baronesses got with child by them by the thousands, and thereupon they gave birth, O King, to barons that were to prove champions, boys as well as girls, to increase once more the baronage. . . ." (p. 136, Volume 1, Vaiśhampāyana to Janamejaya).

A problem all translators of classics have to face is how to convey the spirit of a past age in a modern language to contemporary readers. Professor Van Buitenen tries to accomplish this by resorting to archaisms: "At once, methinks, measures are to be taken. . . ." (Vol. 1, p. 112); "Arjuna begot Abhimanyu on Subhadrā, Bhīma begot Ghaṭotkacha. . . ." (Vol. 1); "From whence do you hail?" (Vol. 1, p. 186, Devayānī to Yayāti); "Pray let me go" (Yayāti to Devayānī); " 'King, pleasure me!' He lay with Śharmishṭha and had his pleasure of her" (Vol. 1, p. 189); "I am unsated of my youth on Devayānī (Vol. 1, p. 191); "O prince sans blame" (Vol. 1, p. 54); "Tell me in truth, celestial! Deign to save me, good sir!" (Vol. 1, p. 61) "Be my wife, buxom woman! Be my wife, my pretty!" (Vol. 1, p. 163, Duṣhyanta to Śhakuntalā); "Menakā said: The reverend lord is a man of great heat. . . ." (Vol. 1, p. 161).

Occasionally there are puzzling renderings. What can "loud stench" mean in

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